Identical to the Ideal

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Identical to the Ideal

by CReed

Summary

Hannibal Lecter had everything he wanted. A beautiful family. A successful career. No unwanted attachments. A secret life as a serial-killing cannibal who had never been suspected by friends and authorities. His life was perfect. Especially since Nigel, his estranged twin, was ready to repair their relationship with a visit with his family. A family Hannibal never knew of.

But tragedy once more takes Nigel from him. Hannibal's life is upended with Nigel's death. Only Nigel's family remains. An infant daughter and a husband no one guessed existed.

Gabriel Lecter is not what he seems. Hannibal is certain of this. As certain as his suspicions that Nigel's death wasn't an accident. He will not rest until he unearths every truth hidden from him. The deeper he digs, he realizes he has stumbled upon something darker than expected. Everything leads back to Gabriel, the man he has started to fall for.

Obsessed and enamored, Hannibal is determined to win the game he and Gabriel started playing with each other the moment he laid eyes on the mysterious man. Love or hate? Murder or mercy? Regret or satisfaction? Hannibal cannot guess at the final outcome and it is deliciously thrilling.

Chapter One

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! A bit ago, as I was posting chapters for Mr. Lecter, I mentioned that I was toying with the idea of possible AUs of that AU. One idea I mentioned was the story from Hannibal's POV. Quite a few people who commented let me know they were really into that thought. So, here it is. At first, I thought I would try to just write short stories to run alongside Mr. Lecter and supplement the chapters. It didn't quite work out that way...I went Midnight Sun on this ish. I've written quite a bit, but it's not finished. I wanted to see what you all thought. I hope you like it!

The title comes from a line by Claude Frollo: “I wanted to see you again, touch you, know who you were, see if I would find you identical with the ideal image of you which had remained with me and perhaps shatter my dream with the aid of reality."

Important note: This story is a companion piece to my story Mr. Lecter, which in turn is an AU Crossover with the romantic comedy Mrs. Winterbourne. If you are not familiar with the other story you really are not going to get what all is happening here. I recommend reading Mr. Lecter first, but whatever. To each their own, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Identical to the Ideal

Act One:

The Brood Parasite

Chapter One

It was a rare thing to have an entire day to himself, let alone a morning when he could sleep in. There was a recent stretch of time that the Egyptian cotton sheets and plump pillows adorning the king-size bed in his bedroom were more for show than actual use. Naturally, Doctor Hannibal Lecter slept past his usual rising time of four in the morning on this day of rare pleasures and indulgences. Though, he couldn't waste such a treat sleeping the day away, he was downstairs by eight.

In silk pajamas and bare feet, he finished tying his robe snugly in place before gathering everything to make breakfast. As coffee brewed, he heated a pan before dropping two perfectly shaped sausage links onto the non-stick surface. Italian. His own recipe. Immediately, the fragrance of meat and seasonings made the atmosphere of his pristine kitchen that much cozier. The sausage was fresh. He was able to make and case them a few days ago before he prepared for bed.

The process was one of his favorites and always something he found therapeutic. Blending aromatic oregano and intense fennel pollen. An alchemy of rustic herbs to create the most potent flavors. A few splashes of one of his preferred white wines to not only meld the flavors but help the meat stick together better. Freshly grounded. Freshly butchered. Hannibal smiled as the links sizzled and popped merrily in their juices. The rare books dealer was appalling in life, but she made for a rather lovely breakfast food.

As she finished browning, Hannibal prepared a cup of coffee and stood sipping it as he looked out at his backyard. The garden was yielding the last of its small harvest. He would have to start canning and freezing what he wouldn't use soon. As he planned what to sew over the fall, he smiled as he took in the scents of the morning. The dark roast steaming in heirloom china. Wood-smoke from a chimney down the street. A neighbor burned leaves yesterday evening. The on-coming autumn lent a crisp, decaying sweetness to the chilled air.

He left his empty cup by the carafe and traded his robe for an apron. There was hardly any excess fat left in the pan once the sausages were transferred to a cutting board to rest. What drippings remained would lend a richer flavor to the finished dish. Another smile teased his lips as he began the rest of his breakfast. Uova in Purgatorio. Eggs in Purgatory.

Perfect for a day he did not have to reheat a pre-made meal before rushing out the door to start another boring shift at the hospital. Time could be taken. A beautiful spread made from scratch. Consumed and enjoyed with no need to hurry. A ritual he adored. Today, cooking had the benefit of not only keeping his hands busy, but also his mind. Too many thoughts and emotions attempted to steal his calm. It would not do to let his excitement get the best of him. What he needed was his usual patience, though he was finding obtaining that to be a surprising challenge.

At some point in the late afternoon or early evening, Nigel would arrive. Every time he remembered, his elation and longing almost overcame him. He didn't feel shame for his unusual bouts of giddiness. For the first time in almost thirty years, he would lay eyes on his brother. His twin. Brought with him would be his Gabi. An “angel” who seemed to have mesmerized Nigel with not only her beauty, but the music she played. Though, Nigel was very guarded and tight-lipped about her. It was amusing to think his serious, business-minded brother fell in love with a cellist. The couple would also bring their baby, Katinka, along for the trip. The thought of meeting, holding, his niece sent a strange thrill through him.

A sister-in-law and niece. Members of his family he never knew he had until just a few weeks before when Nigel called to declare their existence. A wife and baby. So long his twin had stayed away. The mix of excitement and anxiety was something Hannibal rarely felt and he savored the rush of nerves. Nigel was coming back to him. A reconciliation Hannibal had imagined countless times over the years. So much had happened since they last were together. He wanted everything to be perfect for Nigel's arrival.

Everything else in Hannibal's life was put on hold the moment Nigel called him. Nothing else mattered until he had Nigel once more by his side.

For the last few weeks, he slowed the process and put on hold all his plans he had of retiring from medicine. He was finally going to lay down his scalpel, professionally anyway, to

pursue his preferred field of psychiatry. The choice to wait was easy and he lost no sleep over it. He could focus on his career later. Now, he enjoyed the odd, yet amusing, urge to nest.

As he plated his eggs and sausage and cut a few pieces of crusty sourdough bread he baked the day before, Hannibal began a mental list of everything he still needed to finish before he was supposed to pick Nigel and Gabi up from the train station. His uncle and sister wanted to come along, but he didn't see the sense in that. They could finish preparing the estate. And they all didn't have to suffer the dull trip from Vilnius back to their home if they didn't have to.

He had just finished a second bite of saucy bread and cheesy eggs when his phone rang. For a terrible moment, he feared it was the hospital. It wouldn't be the first time, nor the last, that he was called in on his day off. His relief warmed his voice when he answered his uncle's number.

“Good morning, Robertus.”

“Hannibal.”

The older man's tone was unlike anything he could ever remember hearing from him. Instantly, Hannibal's guard was up, hackles raised from some unknown threat. His food soured in the pit of his stomach. “Is everything all right?” A terrible feeling crept along his spine, telling him nothing was.

“Hannibal,” Robertus repeated and seemed to gather his strength on a shuddered breath and Hannibal was up from the table to hurry to his room before he was aware of moving. “There's been an accident. A terrible accident.”

“Where?” But he knew.

“The train Nigel was traveling on. It derailed. Crashed. It's the only thing on the news.”

Hannibal took a steadying breath and grabbed the clothes he already set out before turning the shower on. “Where did this happen?”

“Outside of Druskininkai, in the early hours of the morning.”

“Depending on how far they made it past Druskininkai, any survivors would be taken back or to the hospital in Alytus. I'll make my way there as soon as I'm ready. Try to find out exactly where while I'm driving.”

“Find him, Hannibal.”

“I will,” he promised his uncle before he hung up.

* * * * *

When Robertus called, Hannibal didn't want to believe what he was hearing. He didn't want to accept the truth he could feel deep in his bones. During the drive to the hospital, he still

held onto hope. He was foolish to do so. For the past few moments he sat in a stiff, ugly chair and stared down at the trinket in his hands.

They gave Hannibal what belongings Nigel had on him, after he identified his twin's body.

As impeccable and self-aware as he was, as much as he prided himself in the image he presented to the world, he couldn't bring himself to care about his wrinkled suit, messy hair and day-old scruff that covered his jaw and cheeks. Very little he considered important mattered at the moment. It could have been hours since he sat or seconds. It didn't matter. The loss of time didn't matter. Nothing did, but the bracelet he held.

He traced the surface of the metal over and over with fingertips that shook less with each passing touch, the repetition a small but needed comfort. A band of silver entwined with one of platinum. Antlers engraved in an interlocking weave along the cuff. A parting gift many years ago. A tear ran down his cheek as he continued to feel along the grooves, as if he could absorb the essence of the man it once belonged to.

Nigel still wore it.

It was difficult to decipher what hurt most: the fact that Nigel left him behind and tried to forget his family by creating a new one; or that he didn't forget Hannibal at all, but still kept them apart because he had always been the stubborn one.

Hannibal allowed himself a little while longer to grieve, to bask in the feeling of absolute heartbreak. It was a rare thing for him to feel this kind of emotion. The only times he ever did was connected to his siblings. He would give his lamentation, give Nigel and all the pain he dealt Hannibal, the proper consideration and respect he would always show his twin.

The chaos around him finally brought him back to the present. The hospital was nearly engulfed in madness that only a large-scale tragedy could create. Victims of the crash were still being brought in. Alive and dead. An endless parade of gore and horror. He watched an orderly mop up a congealing pool of blood in the hall that led to the crowded wing that was serving as emergency surgery rooms. He swallowed his remaining tears and stood, collecting his coat and Nigel's meager belongings before making his way to the service desk.

He understood procedure, especially during such a crisis, and knew Nigel's remains would have to be stored in the frigid morgue until everything had calmed down and organized. He put on his best charming demeanor under the circumstances and stepped in front of the nurse, Klara, to get her attention. The desk area was blessedly quiet at the moment, though Klara couldn't hide the extra strain she had been under for the past two days in the stressed smiled she flashed him.

“I will be leaving now. All the paperwork has been returned to you, filled out and signed where needed. I was put in charge of Nigel Lecter's remains and given authority over his final arrangements. Please notify me as soon as he is released from the pending investigations.” Hannibal tried to give her a pleasant smile. Though it felt something more like a grimace to him, she seemed to appreciate his attempt at civility.

“Of course, Dr. Lecter.” Klara leaned forward, words and demeanor halting, as if she wanted to say something more but worried to be overheard.

Strange. Hannibal mirrored her movements, providing her a more private exchange in the middle of the bustling corridor. “Was there something else?” The look she gave him after she glanced around made his grip tighten on Nigel's bracelet until he could feel the grooves imprinting into the flesh of his palms. Whatever her concerns, they seemed to be a sensitive matter.

“Do you wish to be notified of any changes regarding Mr. Lecter's remaining family?” she whispered.

Her words staggered him. He reached out to steady himself, uncaring of the papers and clutter he scattered. Klara reached to help him but froze at the look he gave her. Smart girl. Hannibal didn't know what would have happened if someone touched him at that moment. “There was no word on any survivors of Nigel's family.”

Horror filled the young woman's face. “No one told you.”

“What? Told me what?” He couldn't help the sharp edge to his voice, though, he did manage to keep from yelling.

Klara winced all the same but carried on as best she could, used to belligerent and emotional families. “Nigel's daughter is alive, but the doctor wished her to stay a little while to monitor her vitals. Make sure she didn't suffer any brain damage, or any other injuries, from the trauma.” Once more, she leaned close after making sure no one else could possibly overhear them. “And his husband survived, as well. Though, his condition is much more critical.”

When he first arrived, Hannibal informed the hospital that his twin had been traveling with his wife and infant daughter. Hospital staff were busy sorting through bodies. No one had been claimed as possible family members to Nigel. That was almost two days ago. Hannibal had accepted that Gabi and Katinka were lost, in body and spirit. Accepted his grief for them, as well. To hear the Lecters had not suffered three deaths but only one almost caused him to miss a vital detail that slipped softly from Klara's lips.

Husband? A curious notion, when it came to Nigel. He had never seemed to reciprocate any interest shown to him by other men. Only seeming to be attracted to women and too indoctrinated by the annoyingly conservative society they lived in to openly live as anything but a straight man. Gay marriage—gay couples in general—were not the most accepted in Lithuania. That went triple for Romania. “There must be some mistake. Nigel was married to a woman he referred to as, 'Gabi.' They had a young daughter. She would only be five months old, or so.”

Klara shook her head, insistent but gentle. “There has yet to be a woman found and identified as Nigel's wife. However,” she seemed to steel herself, for her benefit or Hannibal's he didn't know, “Nigel's body was, apparently, found wrapped around a female infant and adult *man*. If not for their combined efforts, the baby wouldn't have made it.”

“And this other man survived?”

“It's a wonder he did. He was holding the baby so tight, we were told, even unconscious.” She gave Hannibal a kind, understanding, smile. “To get around any possible red tape or policies that would restrict this man's access to their baby, the doctors on call that night labeled him only as Nigel's 'family member.'”

“The baby, how is she?”

“Almost given a clear bill of health. She has some bruises and minor scrapes and cuts, but the worst has started healing well. Bruised ribs and legs. Tension in her neck, but no fractures. She cries a lot, confused and in pain. The doctor's are monitoring her for any issues such as brain damage, hearing damage—that sort of thing. I can have her charts brought to you, Doctor?”

“Yes, thank you. And the man? What it his condition?” A shadow came over her features, something guarded and worried that made an interesting sense of anxiety spike along Hannibal's nerves.

“Still touch and go, I'm afraid. He's being kept with the other survivors, for the time being. Last I heard, they induced a coma as he heals from the trauma his body suffered.”

Hannibal would ask further about him later. Right now, there was something else. Something much more pressing. “May I see Katinka?”

“Of course.”

Klara exchanged a few soft words with the other orderlies and technicians behind the desk and office area before she stood to join him in the corridor. Still clinging to Nigel's possessions, Hannibal followed her in a frazzled haze.

Even during working hours, Hannibal hardly ever found his way to the Maternity Ward and never into the Nursery. He assumed this one was like any other in every hospital, yet he couldn't help taking in the details. Sterile and bright, clinical. Cribs lined up side by side in neat rows. Covered and cozy and a strange mix of detachment and tenderness. Rows of babies, nurtured and thriving—ready to be plucked for their awaiting families. Beneath the chemical scents of antiseptics and fresh laundry was the faint sweetness of milk and formula. Hypoallergenic soap and sleep-warmed skin.

A piercing ache shot through him at the idea of one of these belonging to Nigel.

Klara spoke with the nurse on-hand. She remained with Hannibal but did not hover. He gave her his coat and bag at her gentle request. They were taken further into the nursery. Three from the end. Two rows from the middle. Hannibal could barely hold himself back as the nurse picked up a bundle from a warm cradle. The blanket wrapped around her was white with blue flowers and yellow ducks dotting the soft fleece.

Katinka made a snuffling, gurgling whine at being disturbed and Hannibal didn't realize he had tears slipping once more down his cheeks until he noticed one drip onto her blanket.

He traced tender touches along her cheek where a scrape still reddened her delicate skin. Katinka settled as she squinted up at him. Tired blue eyes seeing yet not as they took in his features and he couldn't help smiling at her confusion. Such an observant thing already. *Do you think you know me, little one?*

The novelty of someone almost familiar holding her wore off after a few moments of staring one another down. Katinka's drowsy face scrunched into a grimace of discomfort as she started to wriggle in her swaddling. He held her to his shoulder, whispering endearments and meaningless sentiments before her first temperamental cries left her. He kissed her head, inhaled the unique scent of her, and let her wail against his wrinkled lapel. How she had suffered so already in her short life. Her pain would last a lifetime, in some ways. Katinka whimpered but snuggled closer as Hannibal continued to soothe her.

Fussy and sore and the most perfect thing Hannibal had ever seen. And for a whole minute, he forgot the reason he was holding her in a hospital.

The on-hand nurse approached to relieve him too soon of his charge. “Technically, visiting hours ended an hour ago, but we can make an exception for this little blessing.” She smiled and straightened Katinka's blanket. “You can come visit her as soon as the morning shift begins.”

Hannibal willed himself to calm. His urge to snap the nurse's neck and storm out of the hospital with Katinka was almost too great to ignore. “Of course. Thank you, for bending the rules as much as you did. I will be here, every day, until I can take her home.” He turned to Klara, smoothing down his suit jacket and took his things when she offered them. “Now, would it be too much trouble to be shown the man who was brought in with Nigel?”

Without protest or waiting for word from someone higher up, he was taken away from the Maternity Ward to meet Gabi. Hannibal didn't waste time trying to imagine who this person was. Everything he thought he knew had been torn apart, flipped on it's axis and clobbered back together in a flash of existence. He vowed to stop trying to predict anything at the moment.

He was led down a lonely corridor, away from the constant activity of the surgery wing, where several of the severely wounded were being kept. Critical condition. Some held on to life simply through machines working for their bodies because theirs no longer could. A few beds here and there were empty, awaiting an occupant or messed from a previous body expiring after hours of fighting to stay alive.

A depressing place, but Hannibal was no stranger to the dead and dying. His curiosity far outweighed any sense of foreboding such a place usually gave the living and healthy. Tucked in the corner, unknown and loosely titled with Hannibal's last name, was a bruised and broken young man.

It was hard to discern what his features actually were. Gabi's entire body seemed to be swollen. Beaten. Sliced up. Red, inflamed skin criss-crossed with black stitches. Though he had been washed and looked after, there were still traces of blood in his hairline and in the creases of his nostrils. Red, black, yellow, purple and blue. His face was a canvas slashed with streaks of pain. A deep cut reached from his right temple to the middle of his forehead

and Hannibal couldn't help wondering how deep the wound went. Wires and tubes led in and out of his supine body. A pitiful sight.

“It's best not to get your hopes up. His percentage rate of survival isn't the highest.”

The warning broke him of his thoughts and Hannibal nodded in understanding, looking his fill of such ghastly, beautiful damage done to the man. There was nowhere to touch that wasn't wounded. From head to toes. Arms and legs. His waist was wrapped in gauze. Old scars beneath fresh lacerations. It gave Hannibal pause, those old marks. How did a cellist come about such interesting scars?

Hannibal looked about once more at the sad surroundings. Gabi had been settled among the other wounded like some lost refugee. He sighed and turned to the helpful nurse. “What do I need to do to get Gabi moved to a private room, where I can visit? I will be here for the foreseeable future. Until I can take Katinka, or both, home. In that time, I could be considered on-call, if the hospital wishes to have another pair of capable hands at their disposal. And in any case, I can help care for Gabi, while so many others demand attention.”

Klara smiled but shook her head. “Upgrading his room shouldn't be a problem, Dr. Lecter. I will let the doctors working the accident know you offer your assistance. Gabi should be moved by tonight, after your paperwork is processed.”

“Very good, thank you.” Hannibal tore his gaze from the battered man asleep before them and slipped on his coat. “I will be leaving for the hotel I'm staying at. The hospital has my personal number if anything changes during the night. I'll be back for the start of visiting hours.”

“Try and get some sleep, Doctor.”

They walked back to the service desk before parting ways. Throughout the walk to his car and the drive to the hotel, Hannibal felt nothing but elation. He didn't feel the flurries of snow picking up with the biting wind. Exhaustion no longer pulled him down further into despair. He didn't even have the ache of hunger, even though he couldn't remember the last time he ate.

Katinka was alive. As painful as losing Nigel was, Hannibal still had a piece of him. Here and whole and his to take home. If he couldn't have Nigel, his child was a fine consolation prize.

And Gabi. At the thought of the dying thing, so fragile in his sickbed, a smile came ticking up the corner of Hannibal's pale lips. The first moment of good cheer he had felt in days. He didn't know what all Gabi was, but he looked forward to finding out.

* * * * *

As Hannibal finally dialed his uncle's number, he regretted the time but also gave himself some allowance to his usual consideration. It was past the time he should have called, but Robertus would understand Hannibal's need to eat and be clean for the first time in days. Hannibal stared at the remains of his dinner. As soon as room service arrived, he devoured

everything within minutes. The first bite reminded him of the last time he ate: an aborted breakfast nearly three days before that no doubt sat spoiled on his gleaming dinner table.

He finished half a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon before stepping into a near-scalding shower.

Now, fresh from a long shower and dressed in soft pajamas, the phone rang against his ear while he sank onto the edge of the bed.

“Hallo, Hannibal. Is everything all right?”

“Good evening, Robertus. I know it's rather late, but I wanted to call as soon as I could.”

“Has something happened?”

The resigned pain in Robertus' voice caused a dull ache to ripple through Hannibal's chest. His uncle wasn't expecting any good news. Even if he was, whatever Hannibal said could never eclipse the loss of Nigel. “Yes. There was a lag in communication. They have been found. Katinka and Gabi. They're alive. I only found out a few hours ago.”

For a moment, Robertus didn't speak. A soft, sobbing sigh crackled over the connection. “How are they?”

“Katinka is alert and receptive to socializing. They wish to keep her a little while longer as her injuries heal, and monitor her for any trauma that might have occurred to her brain or hearing.”

“You saw her?”

“I did. She's beautiful, Robertus. There are so many traces of Nigel in her face. I think she will have his coloring. Blonde like Nigel and Mischa. Though, her eyes are blue. A lovely blue that I would hate to see fade.”

“You held her?”

“I did. She seemed so small in my hands, but she is right where she needs to be as far as weight and growth.”

“That's wonderful news.” Robertus' relief could almost be felt over the connection. “And Gabi?” Even upset and grieving, he noticed Hannibal's hesitation. “Is she all right, Hannibal?”

“No, not at as well as Katinka. And Gabi is not a 'she.'”

“What do you mean?”

“Gabi is a man. A young man. They think he is in his late twenties or early thirties.”

“The hospital doesn't know?” Robertus sounded incredulous, upset on Gabi's behalf.

“He was found with no identification. The only reason they placed him with Katinka and Nigel, labeled him with our family name, is because he was found protecting Katinka. Nigel was wrapped around them both. And they cannot ask him to verify. His injuries are so vast and critical, that they induced a coma as he heals through the worst of it. They warned me to prepare for him not surviving.”

“This young man was Nigel's 'Gabi?' His spouse? Katinka's other parent?”

Hannibal understood Robertus' confusion. “Apparently, so. I still have yet to come to terms with the evidence that suggests it. I never knew Nigel to show appreciation for men. God knows he teased me enough for my interest in men and women. It was a surprise to hear the Gabi he settled down for, for the last four years and had a child with, is not a woman.”

“Do you think that's why he stayed away? He feared we wouldn't accept his family?”

Hannibal quickly soothed his worries. “I know for a fact that's not why, Robertus. Nigel's grievance was because of my actions, and mine alone.”

“That was so long ago, Hannibal. You were children.”

Hannibal's chuckle floated through the speaker and he could imagine the stern, affectionate disapproval on his uncle's face. “Nigel and I shared much more than looks. His forgiveness was hard-won, especially after his trust was betrayed.”

“I wish you both would have found peace with each other.”

“There is no point dwelling on such things. There is only the way forward.”

Robertus let it go, as he always did whenever the topic of Nigel's strained relationship with his family came up. He sighed and Hannibal heard the rustling of fabric and the shifting of a mattress. Robertus had retired for the evening but had not been sleeping. “I gather you will be staying close by, until Katinka is ready to come home.”

“Until they are both ready,” Hannibal confirmed. “I wouldn't leave Gabi abandoned; to wake in an unfamiliar country, surrounded by unfamiliar faces.”

“I am happy to hear that. The thought of leaving with his child troubles me very much, and thinking of him waking alone after such a tragedy hurts my heart.”

Hannibal smiled at his uncle's sentiment. Already so attached to the pair he had yet to lay eyes on. “I will spare your heart for another time, then.”

Robertus sighed once more, a long and haggard thing. “This is all such a terrible mess. I would appreciate a call now and then as an update, but I will understand if it slips your mind.”

“Any changes and I will immediately notify you.”

“Then we await your return to us, Hannibal. Hopefully, soon you will bring our treasures home to care for.”

“I won't leave without them, I promise.” He could only hope it wouldn't just be a newly orphaned infant who joined him on the return trip.

“Get some rest, dear boy. I fear the following days are going to be long and harrowing.”

“Good night, Robertus. Give my love to Mischa and Murasaki.”

He ended the call and got ready for bed. Everything was in its place for tomorrow. Fresh clothes. Reading material and paperwork to keep himself busy for the times he wouldn't be with Katinka or Gabi. The beginnings of a plan formed in his head that a full night's sleep would only help shape and refine. For the first time in days, Hannibal felt alive. Rejuvenated. No longer frozen in inactivity. He had a purpose once more.

Sleep came easily and fast. He drifted off with the phantom scent of sweet milk in his nose, the ghost of silky hair beneath his careful touch and the shade of purple bruises and black stitches behind his eyelids.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say right here and now that this project has been fascinating and super fun to write. You know how they say that if you were to ask five people who witnessed a car crash to give their account, you would get five different stories? That's what's happening here. I can already tell you that this isn't quite the rom-com vibing story Mr. Lecter was. It's writing more like a thriller. There still will be humor and fluff and this is now Hannibal's romance, but it has an even darker edge to it. I hope anyone who stopped by enjoyed the first chapter. I would love to hear what you think.

Stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! Before I get to the next chapter, I wanted to say you'll probably find some of the dialogue familiar. As this is Hannibal's side of events, some of the conversations he was present for will be the same. This chapter is kind of fun because you get to see some things Will missed. He's a bit of an unreliable narrator at the beginning and it was fun to play around with. Also, I wanted to say thank you so much to ropaola, EmilyElm and Jor_ishere for not only coming back for this crazy installment but also leaving me such kind and lovely comments. I really appreciate you taking the time to let me you know you enjoyed the first chapter.
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two

A week came and went within the bright, bland confines of the hospital. A week of scares and triumphs.

Every day Katinka grew stronger. The bruising on her ribs and legs healed nicely, though it hurt her whenever she cried and sometimes when she ate. There didn't seem to be any brain damage from the accident. A fortunate surprise, as Hannibal had finally brought himself to look at pictures of the crash and now knew the extent of the potential damage she could have endured. She, along with her fathers, would have been tossed around and into their surroundings before being buried beneath the wreckage. It really was a wonder anyone survived, let alone a child as small and fragile as she.

There also didn't seem to be an damage to her sight or hearing, though she could have lasting effects no one would be able to officially diagnose until she was older. For now, she responded to outside stimuli as any infant her age would. Her appetite was improving. She was finally starting to warm up to Hannibal. It amused him that Katinka seemed to understand on some base, animal level that he was not her father. However, after a week, she cooed and gurgled at him when he held her. He could gentle her when she started to fuss. On one morning he got her to giggle. Hannibal could not remember another time he had been so instantly charmed by another human being, other than his sister.

Katinka's continuous healing and happiness made the hospital, and the situation they all found themselves in, bearable.

Gabi, on the other hand, was fighting a constant battle. Every time Hannibal was convinced Gabi was winning it, another backslide occurred. An infection tried to take hold in the wound

that cut across Gabi's abdomen. It was a terrible trauma he suffered. The piece of debris that killed Nigel, almost cleaved him in two, gutted Gabi. It missed everything vital, but the surgeons still had to keep Gabi's insides from spilling out. The amount of blood he lost just from that injury should have been enough to kill him.

After the danger of infection passed, a seizure sent Gabi's body into intense convulsions one dreary afternoon. The doctors blamed the attack on the cut to his head and warned for the possibility for more. Any of which could be fatal. Gabi's lungs and brain were still functioning, but everything else needed assistance. He was fed intravenously. Nurses came and went to check his catheter and colostomy bag. Through it all there was no change. Gabi slept in a coma that the severely traumatized fell into. He was the only thing keeping himself from waking.

Hannibal watched closely for any hint that the man would finally slip away. He waited and observed. Some of the swelling had gone down. Puffiness and busted blood vessels gave way to reveal boyish youth. A strange mix of fascination and rage took hold in Hannibal's heart, anchoring there since the moment he saw him. Burrowing ever deeper as the days crawled by.

The bruises faded, leaving pale skin and dark stubble for Hannibal to admire. Messy, dull brown curls caught at the scratchy pillowcase beneath Gabi's head as his hair lengthened. Everything about him was dulled. Faded. Tainted. Hannibal hated it. He despised the scent Gabi gave off. The stench of death and chemicals almost completely masked the complex combination of hormones and natural musk that made up the scent of the man. The temptation to end this all for Gabi was strong. He would make it painless. Merciful. Hannibal could be merciful.

Curiosity always stayed his hand.

But two weeks into their stay, while Hannibal sat at his bedside, Gabi woke. For a fleeting moment. Long lashes fluttered against bruised cheeks. A crack in the eyelids. Dazed, tired eyes. Such a dark, captivating blue. The only vibrancy amidst a sea of deathly and drab hues. The same blue as Katinka's eyes. Hannibal didn't say anything, made no move to comfort or explain. He merely watched as the weary gaze drifted about, landed on him, then closed once more to oblivion.

Thick, warm rage filled Hannibal once more. The idea that such a creature belonged to Nigel was preposterous. It was maddening that the notion was even being entertained, let alone accepted. He couldn't explain why the certainty of his denial made a home in his bones. It was a thing that just was. Something was very wrong and he couldn't pinpoint what it was.

Outwardly, Hannibal was as collected as ever. He checked his watch before he stood to gather his things. Visiting hours were almost over for the day. He had already seen Katinka one last time before he helped put her to bed. His attention had solely been focused on Gabi for the last few hours. Other than that one moment of consciousness, the monotonous day had been uneventful. Rain fell all day and looked to be the same for the night. Hannibal took the time to settle the blankets closer around Gabi's thinning frame before he left the room.

* * * * *

Once returned to the hotel, Hannibal took his time with dinner and a shower. He thought over everything that had happened. His doubts. His suspicions. The dark things his instincts whispered to him every time he laid eyes on Gabi. By the time he was dressed in pajamas, his resolve had strengthened and he took his laptop with him to bed.

The first and easiest thing he could do was a simple Internet search.

Nothing.

He found information on Nigel, of course. His twin's name was attached to several businesses, along with a contact number. Hannibal didn't know enough about Gabi yet to search. There was nothing to be found regarding him, or their baby. Nigel's personal life was shrouded in shadows. It troubled Hannibal.

Even if Nigel stayed away from social media, there should have been something. Was Nigel that afraid to broadcast his relationship, his family? Or was it something else? Whenever he made himself remember Nigel's body, it never escaped his notice how fit his brother had been. He kept up a physical regime to stay in shape, just like Hannibal. If not moreso. Nigel's physique and muscle tone was not common among simple businessmen. And the tattoos. They spoke of a hard lifestyle and a certain persona he showed to the world. Just as Hannibal's impeccable manners and striking suits spoke for him.

Is that what Nigel hid his family from? They were apart for a long time. Longer than they had been together. Hannibal couldn't begin to guess what all his enterprising brother got up to. Over the years, he had checked up on him, but he respected Nigel's wishes and left him relatively alone. So confident he had been that Nigel would return willingly to him and now he wished he would have snooped a little harder over the years.

Wishing accomplished nothing. Hannibal set his laptop aside and grabbed his phone. He searched his contacts for the number he needed. The line picked up after the the third ring. It was getting late, but this was her personal number.

“Lidija Stanislava speaking.”

“Good evening, Lidija.”

“Hannibal! How are you, my friend?”

“Not well at all, I'm afraid. My family has had a bit of a tragedy. Nigel is dead.”

There came a shocked gasp of breath into the phone. She hadn't heard, then. “When? How? This is terrible news.”

“Just recent. He and his family were some of the unfortunate passengers on the train that derailed in Druskininkai.”

“Oh. Of course, I had heard of the accident but...'His family?' I had only checked in on him for you, what, six years ago? When did he find the time to settle down?”

“Within the last four years, apparently.”

She groaned and he could imagine the exasperated look on her face. “He was always so sneaky. Always full of surprises, our Nigel. I'm terribly sorry for you and yours, Hannibal. What can I do?”

“I have come to a dead end whilst looking into Nigel's personal business. His spouse and child survived. They will be staying with us, of course, after they're released from the hospital. I thought it would help to make contact with their life in Romania, but I haven't found much on Nigel. Not even an address.”

“That is wonderful news about his family. At least not all was lost. Nigel was evasive and covered his tracks well then, I can only imagine how cautious he was after he had a child. Do you want me to take care of it?”

“You will be paid well, as always.”

“We can work out payment later. I expect you'll want my usual thoroughness? Financial records, business and medical?”

“His marriage records, as well. I'll dance at your wedding, if you can manage to get his daughter and spouse's information.”

Lidija chuckled. “The day you say 'yes,' will be the day we dance,” she deflected his offered favor. “I'll see what I can do. I think I might go down to Romania for this one. I'll take Vidas with me. The others can stay behind at the office and take care of things from there, should you need to make immediate contact.”

“I'll wire you expenses as soon as our call ends. Give my best to Vidas.”

She hummed her affirmation. “I'm sure he'll want to call you soon. I'll make arrangements to travel and set out as soon as I can. Shouldn't take more than a day or two to start.”

“Thank you, Lidija. I feel better already, knowing you've taken this job for me.”

“Of course. You will have your hands full for who knows how long. You're my favorite friend and favorite client. Let me do this for you and your family, while you take care of the rest.”

They said there goodbyes after making final agreements to their contract. Hannibal put his phone away with his laptop. Soon, he would have to tell his uncle what he was doing. His thoughts and fears. But he wouldn't make a move until he knew a few more details. He settled down to bed after preparing for the morning. He didn't expect anything different for the coming day, but he could hope.

* * * * *

Hannibal had planned to spend another miserable afternoon reading when his attention was pulled from his book by the scent of tears. Warm and briny and startling against the usual sterile nothingness of the hospital room. Hannibal marked his place and set the book aside to fix his gaze on Gabi. He watched, transfixed, as tears slipped down his temples. Gabi's heart

rate was normal. He didn't seem to be dreaming. There was no fluttering of eyelids to indicate deep sleep. Gabi was awake but feared opening his eyes to the world.

Finally, he did and looked right at Hannibal. Surprise and happiness flashed across his battered features. “Nigel?”

Many times in their youth, Hannibal and Nigel had been mistaken for one another. Hannibal didn't care about the common error. Sometimes, it gave them an advantage that they would exploit. This was the first time Hannibal bristled at the misunderstanding. However, in the seconds after speaking, Hannibal watched as a clearing, shrewd gaze swept over him. From his hair to his polished shoes. They took in everything in an instant, lingering on the unmarked skin of his neck. Blue eyes glanced belatedly to the bare ring finger on his left hand.

Chapped lips worked to form words out of a sleep-roughened throat. “Who are you?”

Gabi's voice was a lot deeper than he expected. A flat, precise, American accent spoke the question in breathless English. Hannibal decided to err on the side of caution and switched his language to match. “Nigel never told you he had a twin.” It wasn't a question, simply a statement for confirmation.

Gabi shook his head and seemed to shrink in on himself, making himself appear smaller. Harmless. Helpless. Not worth the trouble for the animal he sensed prowling close by. The display only piqued Hannibal's curiosity even further. He would say this, Gabi was proving to be interesting already. “I knew he had siblings. A brother and sister, but he never said...” He trailed off, battered face scrunching up in woozy concentration, as if trying to remember details now lost to twisted metal and tormented screams. Suddenly, horror filled his eyes and what color he had drained from his face. “Katinka!”

Hannibal was out of his chair before he consciously thought to react. For being in a coma for over two weeks, Gabi was fast. If Hannibal's reflexes weren't honed as they were, Gabi would have landed on the floor in a painful sprawl. As it was, he only accomplished a stumbling stand and almost ripped his IV from his forearm. He didn't seem to fully comprehend the pain he was in, or the state of his undress. Wild panic flared in his eyes and for a moment Hannibal thought Gabi might actually try to fight him off in search of Katinka.

It occurred to Hannibal that he was dealing with a cornered beast. He kept his emotions blanketed, gentling Gabi as well as he could. As he hushed Gabi's distressed concerns, half-formed demands to see Katinka, Hannibal lowered him to his bed once more. “I need you to calm down. Katinka is safe. She's alive. While you settle yourself back under the covers, I'll tell the nurses to bring her to you.”

His words and tone calmed Gabi. At the mention of Katinka, at hearing she survived, Gabi slumped beneath his touch. The fight went out of him and tears spilled over his dark lashes. His shoulders shuddered and his pale throat worked to swallow the emotions that wracked his body. Hannibal couldn't stop himself from reaching out to brush away a tear rolling down Gabi's tender cheek.

Gabi seemed surprised, at the comfort or the fact that he was crying Hannibal couldn't say. He looked up at Hannibal, tangled curls falling over his brow to shade watery eyes and hide the tender stitchwork on his forehead. “Thank you...”

“Hannibal,” he supplied. There was something to this man. He couldn't grasp just what. Vulnerable and scared, but there was so much dangerous potential. He could feel it, teasing beneath Gabi's shaken nerves. However, now was not the time to try to decipher what all this meant. One thing at a time. “Think nothing of it.”

Hannibal left him once he was certain Gabi wouldn't topple out of bed. He stepped out of the room and beckoned over a nurse who was passing by. “Gabi is awake. He's shaken and distraught. Can someone bring Katinka up to him? Perhaps bring him a lunch tray, as well? Thank you.”

The nurse was already nodding and briskly walking away. “Of course. Someone will be right up.”

He came back inside and sat once more beside the bed. Gabi only glanced at him once, shifting beneath his blanket. He didn't speak and Hannibal didn't feel the need to fill the silence. He took advantage of Gabi's stupor to study him. So different than the state he had been in. He was exhausted and in pain, still in a haze from medication, but Hannibal could see how alert he was. His brain was working fast to make sense of everything, piecing together what he knew. And yet, he didn't ask questions. Never wondered aloud what happened or where he was. Didn't enquire about Nigel. Did he remember the blood and the screams? The life that slipped from Nigel as he fought to protect Gabi and Katinka?

As silent and unassuming as he made himself, Hannibal could sense Gabi's growing agitation. Like a building storm. A charge to the air. Distress and anger and determination all fluttered across his face. Resolve settled there, even as fresh tears gathered in his eyes. It was enthralling to watch and Hannibal felt he would have given anything right then to know what was going through his head. But then the door opened and he watched Gabi's demeanor change entirely. He made a sobbing sort of a whimper as he reached for Katinka. The nurse barely had her lifted out to him before Gabi cradled her close. Gabi placed Katinka gently onto his covered thighs to start unwrapping the blanket. His smile was blinding as Katinka looked up at him.

“Hey, Tink.”

The nickname was reverently murmured and the nurse smiled, indulgent and emotional at the sight of their reunion. Her professionalism caught up with her and she started going over Katinka's charts with Gabi while he examined every scratch and bruise on her tiny body.

“Katinka sustained rather minor injuries, considering the accident. She had some cuts and bruises that are mostly healed. Her ribs had been bruised, but nothing the doctors are too concerned about. What they'll want to keep track of are any signs of hearing loss or brain damage that could develop over the next few months. Anything that might suggest vision damage. She'll have to have routine check-ups. It'll be just a formality, really. Everything seems to be fine. She'll be ready to check out as soon as you all are ready to leave the hospital.”

“I don't think he has eyes, or ears, for anyone else, at the moment.” Hannibal stood and walked the nurse back to the door. “I am very familiar with Katinka's current medical history and will relay all information and care to her father, once he is able to tear his attention from her.” He gave her a polite smile and didn't have the heart, nor the patience, to explain that Gabi most likely hadn't understood a word of her Lithuanian anyway.

Once the nurse was escorted out, Hannibal returned to his seat. He couldn't decide what was more captivating, Katinka's reaction to being coddled in such a familiar manner or Gabi's shaken search. She only fought the touches once, but then Gabi frowned and made a sharp, hissing sound that settled her instantly. Trained. Chastised and comforted all at once. It was fascinating to watch. Gabi noticed and soothed every scratch and bruise, murmuring soft nonsense at every whimper she made. He brought her close to skim chafed lips across her ear where one of the last deep cuts had yet to completely heal. Gabi's eyes drifted shut and he took a deep breath, scenting. A trembling smile wavered along his mouth as Katinka reached up to lay one tiny hand against her father's unshaven chin.

Hannibal had to break the perfect moment, disrupt the beauty of such a sight, and voiced the one thing he kept thinking since he was made privy to this man's existence. “Nigel was always vague and didn't like telling his family much, but I never thought whenever he mentioned his 'beautiful Gabi' that he was talking about you.”

His words caused a slight tremor in Gabi's hands. If he wasn't looking for any and every reaction from him, Hannibal might have missed it. Gabi took his time to gently wrap Katinka's blanket once more around her. Hannibal could practically hear all the thoughts fluttering about his head, battering around like moths slamming against a darkened windowpane. Again, the urge to split Gabi's skull open to divine all his secrets was almost too great to not act upon. Almost as riveting as that was watching something settle within Gabi. His tense posture relaxed, doubt and fear flowing out of him as resolve came into his haunted eyes. They focused on Katinka and a dying fire seemed to ignite within them.

A wounded, cornered wolf was always the bravest right before they lashed out in one final act of defense.

Gabi took a deep breath and caressed Katinka's hand. “My name is Gabriel. Nigel had a terrible sense of humor and was grossly sentimental.”

He was hiding something. Not quite a lie. There was something more, something woven between the words he spoke. What's more, Hannibal had a feeling Gabriel knew his doubts. Hannibal smiled and fell back on the humor he always found in tragedy. “He did often refer to you as his 'angel.'” Even if awake for just a handful of minutes, he could see Gabriel's energy begin to wane. Now that he saw Katinka, alive and well for himself, his body was demanding rest. “I think you would fare much better in your convalescence away from here. If you feel up to it, I could take you and Katinka home today.”

“Home?” Gabriel glanced his way for a moment before returning his attention to Katinka.

“Yes. With me, and the family excitedly awaiting your arrival.”

“For Nigel and his family.” He pawed at his cheek with a sluggish hand when more tears fell.

Hannibal cleared his throat and found himself scrambling to think of a distraction. He didn't want Gabriel to dissolve into a crying mess. He didn't want to talk about Nigel. “Perhaps,” he made his voice gentle and as persuasive as possible, “getting dressed will help make you feel more grounded. If you can manage staying awake a little longer, we'll see if you're up to making the trip.”

“All right.” It was a positive response, said to him with a sweet, sad little smile over Katinka's head but Hannibal suspected Gabriel was no longer completely present.

Gabriel watched him as he went about the room, gathering everything that accumulated over the weeks spent in the confines of these walls. The way he tracked his every movement didn't bother Hannibal. In fact, he found himself smiling when his back was to Gabriel. Not so muddled, then, that the man didn't sense a threat. Hannibal collected clothes for Gabriel and turned to him once more.

Just as he was about to broach the subject of dressing and preparing to leave, there came a soft knock and the door opened to reveal Gabriel's lunch had arrived. From the smell, he would guess beef broth. Nothing too spicy and gentle on his stomach. It reminded Hannibal of his own plans for when Gabriel was finally completely in his care and vowed to call Mischa at the next chance he had. He thanked the orderly and brought the tray to the bed, only to stop at the harsh refusal from Gabriel, who buried his nose in Katinka's neck when the smell of food wafted closer.

“No.” He swallowed his nausea and softened his voice. “Thank you, but I'm not hungry.”

Hannibal knew what all medication Gabriel had been taking. He had helped administer them to him more often than not in the past week. There was no point in lecturing, in reciting the importance of keeping up a steady diet while Gabriel healed. How it was never good to take medication on an empty stomach. Instead, he placed the tray as far from Gabriel as possible and returned to his bedside. He would have time later to get proper food in him. If Gabriel could stay awake and coherent for a little while longer, he would sway the hospital to release him into his care. Hannibal could be very persuasive when he wanted to be.

When Gabriel gave no indication that he was going to release Katinka and begin dressing, Hannibal asked as gently as he could, “May I hold my niece while you dress?” His words seemed to jolt Gabriel into further awareness. A fetching blush added color to his pallor.

“Of course. I'm so sorry.” However, he paused as he handed Katinka over and looked steadily, for the first time, into Hannibal's eyes. “You can hold her any time you want. As far as I'm concerned, you don't need permission from me for anything when it comes to Tink.”

Surprised at such an offer, Hannibal took the opportunity of their proximity and his rare loss for words to look his fill of Gabriel. Such conflicting emotions and actions. Protective and covetous of his baby and yet he so easily gave her to him. As if he had no real claim to her. Katinka's whimper as she was passed to Hannibal argued otherwise. Was it because he reminded Gabriel of Nigel? This easy trust. Did Gabriel see Katinka's father when he looked at him? The thought made Hannibal want to tear something, someone, apart but he only nodded to accept Gabriel's permission and took Katinka into his arms.

“Thank you.”

Hannibal gave Gabriel as much privacy as he could and walked Katinka the length of the room and back. A choked gasp caught his attention and he turned once more to Gabriel. A surge of sympathy flashed through him at the sight that met him. Gabriel lay frozen on the bed. He only got as far as pulling his blankets away. Much more coherent, he finally noticed the state of his body. Gabriel stared in shocked horror, unable to linger too long in one place. There were too many places that were eye-catching.

He was shirtless. The only covering he had were flimsy, bleached-white briefs. Hospital-issued. Unflattering. They didn't do the man's form, as wasted as it was, justice. Gabriel winced when he moved and pulled the stitching of the gash along his leg that ended just above his knee and began at his hip. A potentially lethal wound that almost caught his femoral artery. One among many causes of death he could have suffered. His right hand was splinted and wrapped. His ankles had been wrapped as well, though those dressings were able to be removed a few days before. The feeding tube came out the first time he woke. Gabriel ran a shaking hand along the bandages wrapped around his abdomen and Hannibal came back to his side with an urge to comfort that he didn't fight.

“It looks a lot worse than it is, now. Apparently, when they finally brought you in they didn't know if they were too late.” Hannibal nodded towards Gabriel's bruised legs and feet. “You didn't fracture anything, although I would recommend a cane while you recover. You have a nasty sprain in your wrist. They had to realign your fingers. There will be swelling and pain for a few more days, but they should heal just fine. What had the surgeons worried was the stab wound to your stomach. You lost a lot of blood, but the debris missed all your vital organs and you didn't develop any sepsis.”

Gabriel seemed to take comfort in his words and started to move to the edge of the bed. Hannibal kept an eye on him as he rocked Katinka. Every small effort exhausted Gabriel but he didn't call for assistance. Just as Hannibal decided to ready Katinka's travel bassinet, a tired voice rose up behind him.

“These aren't mine.”

Hannibal turned to look at Gabriel's slumped figure as he sat on the bed, pants slipped on and fastened. He was dazedly running his hand along his thigh, sliding fingers against the soft fabric of the black slacks. Hannibal took a moment to appreciate the choices he made earlier in the week when he went shopping for Gabriel. It wasn't tailored to fit his wiry frame, but it would do for now and Hannibal always had an impeccable eye for estimation. “I took the liberty of buying you something to wear when you're released. When I arrived, they said your clothes were ruined, cut from you.”

“Thank you.”

Gabriel's tone was weak, a strained timidity to it that had Hannibal moving as quick as he could to take care of Katinka so he could return to his side. As he dressed Katinka properly for the weather, Hannibal kept his attention on Gabriel. It seemed to be more than just his atrophied motor skills that were giving him problems. His hands shook as he fought with the buttons of his dark gray shirt. Tremors began to wrack his body. Hannibal could hear the

ragged gasps of attempted breaths clawing their way out of Gabriel's throat from across the room.

Katinka whimpered, sensing the spike of anxiety from Gabriel. The pitiful sound only made Gabriel's condition worsen. Hannibal gave Katinka a quick kiss to the crown of her head, setting her safely in her bassinet, before rushing to grab up Gabriel before he made himself pass out. He eased Gabriel into the chair beside the bed and took his face into his hands, trying to get him to focus on only him. Gabriel was cool to the touch, clammy, and leaned into the warmth of his hands. Blue eyes, wild with panic, looked to find Katinka. Once they noticed her safely away on the bed, all of their attention landed on Hannibal. Not as present as Hannibal wanted, so he coaxed Gabriel further into coming back to him with lulling commands.

“Breathe, Gabriel. Take a breath. Like me, see? Good. Try and hold that in. Good. Now out.” It wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last, that Hannibal had soothed an anxious animal. Gabriel seemed to fight him even more, offended by his gentling. It amused Hannibal as well as filled him with a sort of admiration. Almost defiant in his need to not rely on Hannibal. Something other than grief and confusion warring inside this man. *Wherever did Nigel find such a creature?*

And then it passed through him. Whatever Gabriel fought, what caused his anxiety to almost overwhelm him, faded away. Gabriel grew limp in Hannibal's hands and Hannibal was mesmerized by the almost euphoric calm that washed over him. A little death of acceptance. His breathing slowed, finally matching up to Hannibal's completely. Hannibal eased his head back to look into the serene stare that watched him with cloudy wariness.

“Would you rather stay another night or so here, instead of coming home?”

“I don't want to be here.”

That declaration could be taken quite a few ways and Hannibal's stoic, professional façade cracked with a small smile when he couldn't help but understand each one of them. “Very well.”

Once Gabriel was settled on his feet, Hannibal made quick work of righting the twill shirt over his shoulders. He took up each arm to button the cuffs, taking extra care when working Gabriel's splint under the fine material. Gabriel was silent, somewhere far from him and their surroundings, as Hannibal started fastening the cool, shining, buttons along his bruised chest and wrapped stomach. Hannibal had a sudden, desperate urge to ask where he went. If Nigel waited for him there.

Instead, he lowered Gabriel once again into the chair and knelt before him. Hannibal had just finished slipping warm wool socks onto his icy feet and picked up one of his shoes when Gabriel's unwrapped hand settled onto his arm to stop his movements. At first he was afraid he had jostled his ankle too harshly, but Gabriel wanted to say something. Hannibal waited, watching as Gabriel's fingers absently rubbed the material of his suit jacket, mesmerized by the eggshell blue.

“Everything important I had was on the train. All of my papers are lost. No identity. No passport. No money. I don't know what to do.”

So forlorn. Despondent. As much as Gabriel's concerns urged Hannibal to find a solution, he could not help marking and filing away the detail that Gabriel's identity *was* a concern at the moment. Did Gabriel not understand that everything would be taken care of? If it wasn't in Hannibal's power to fix, he would find the person who could? Still, he found himself wanting to assure and comfort. “You're family, Gabriel. That's what we're here for: to help you as you focus on your health and that of your daughter's.”

* * * * *

Gabriel, exhausted and pumped full of painkillers as he was, didn't protest being left alone. Content to sit by the window holding Katinka. Staring out at the gray clouds and rain. He wasn't seeing any of it. A parade could pass through his room and Hannibal didn't think he would notice. The best time to make final arrangements.

First, he needed actual permission to take Gabriel and Katinka away, to officially become their care provider. A few turns down brightly lit corridors, several winsome smiles to every haggard and suspicious nurse he passed, and Hannibal was at the office of one of his old classmates. After a knock a tired voice called him in.

“Hannibal?”

Hannibal met the man halfway across the room and accepted the handshake and hug. “Hello, Tomas. It's been a long time.”

“Too long. What brings you here?”

Hannibal took the seat he was offered, unbuttoning his jacket as he settled. “Trying to finalize arrangements.” Tomas only looked on with mild curiosity. He didn't even guess as to the business Hannibal might have. “My brother and his family were involved in the train accident. Nigel was killed but his child and friend survived.” Hannibal couldn't remember what Gabriel was filed as in the paperwork and thought it best to keep his relationship vague.

“Christ. Really?” Tomas sighed and ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. “I am terribly sorry, Hannibal. You must have heard of the hospital's delay in releasing remains to families.”

That gave Hannibal pause and his pleasant mask almost slipped. “No, I had not. I don't understand. I've been here over two weeks, surely the hospital, or whoever else, are ready to let all of those grieving have their loved ones returned? Especially those who have been identified. Take them off the hospital's hands, so to speak.”

“You would think that,” Tomas muttered as he leaned back in his chair. “And I'm really not in any position to help you. I have no idea what's going. I'm not even supposed to be here. Alytus changed my residency and transferred me here when they heard of the accident. And now, I'm being sent away. Again.”

“Why? The situation is on-going. There's still so much for you to do here.”

Tomas shrugged. “I just the call a few minutes ago. I'm being replaced by the end of the day. Someone on the board made the decision.”

“How strange.” Hannibal frowned at the thought of such a change bringing even more disorder to the hospital, to the families waiting to hear word on their loved ones. However, it was fortunate that he caught Tomas when he did.

“I'm sorry if you were looking to me to have any answers in this cock-up.”

“As it happens, I was hoping you could help me with something else. Before someone else takes over your post, could you sign off on Katinka and Gabriel Lecter, naming me as their acting physician? That way, I am free to take them home without having to return them for follow-up treatment. I can care for them at my family's estate, at their own pace. Not surrounded by all this death.”

Tomas didn't take even a few seconds to think it over, not taking into account that what Hannibal asked of him wasn't actually allowed. “Of course. I can't do anything for Nigel, but I can help with this. I'll have a nurse draw up all the paperwork and get a list of all prescriptions they need.”

“Thank you, Tomas.” Hannibal rose to shake his hand again.

Tomas gave him another hug as he saw him out. “You've always been a good friend, Hannibal. How could I refuse, after all the times you've helped me?”

Hannibal left Tomas, one more item on his agenda checked off, and plans to invite the doctor to dinner sometime in the future. By the time he returned to Gabriel's floor, the call had been made to begin his charges' release process. The paperwork wasn't difficult to fill out. In the past two weeks, he became quite familiar with both Katinka and Gabriel's needs. With his signature, and the approval of the doctor in charge, Hannibal was now officially their caregiver. Before he returned to his family, Hannibal stepped into a small conference room that was blessedly empty. He took out his phone and relished the warmth that flooded his chest when the call picked up after the first ring.

“Hannibal.”

“Hello, Mischa. How are you, darling?”

Her sigh was tired and told him a thousand things without her uttering a single word. “Well enough, I suppose. How is everything? Your call is earlier than usual. Has something happened?”

“Only good things, I promise. Gabi—Gabriel—woke late this morning. I am bringing them home. We should be at the estate this evening.”

“How wonderful! Has he spoken? Did he know about Nigel?”

Hannibal smiled at the worry in her voice. “He spoke a little. He's still in a haze from his ordeal and the medication they put him on. He hadn't forgot what happened to Nigel.” Though, they both had been purposely skirting the subject of Nigel's death. “Katinka was happy to have him back. She hardly cried today, after they brought her to him.”

“I'm sure. Poor little dear.”

“Are you at the estate yet?”

“Yes. I completed my migration yesterday and am all moved in at the cottage.”

“Where are Robertus and Murasaki?”

“They went for a walk. I'll tell them the wonderful news when they get back.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you need me to do, in the meantime?”

“Can you check the recipe I sent you the other day to make sure we have everything? We should, aside from the fresh ingredients you'll need to purchase today. If you start it cooking now, we'll be home in time for me to finish it.”

“Consider it done.” Soft laughter filled the connection and Hannibal could see clearly in his mind her teasing smile. “Gabriel's first meal with us will be one of your rare specialties. He has yet to realize what a privilege he has been given already.”

Hannibal's chiding was nothing but teasing indulgence when he replied, “Gabriel is our guest for the unforeseeable future. And now I am his acting doctor. Soup is just the thing for his healing body.”

“A small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless.” Her playfulness wilted into a wistful tone. “Be safe and hurry home, Hannibal. I've missed you.”

“And I you, my dear. Until tonight, then.”

Hannibal put his phone away and returned to Gabriel. He hadn't moved from where Hannibal last saw him. Gabriel was like a doll. Anywhere Hannibal guided him he would go. When Hannibal took Katinka from him, he hardly noticed. Hannibal put the coat he bought Gabriel around him. He smiled as he buttoned the quality wool and watched Gabriel snuggle into it, trailing his chin against the black fur of the collar. One glove would have to do for now and he slipped the one that wouldn't fit over his splint into Gabriel's pocket. Gabriel only shook his head when Hannibal offered to put Katinka in her bassinet.

Hannibal took in the sight before him. Gabriel looked like some misty phantom. Pale, starker still with his drained complexion against the black material of his coat. The bright burst of color of Katinka in his protective hold. A drop of vibrancy against a black and white still life. Hannibal took Gabriel by the chin, a patch of skin that hadn't been abused, to tilt his face towards him. It was almost a compulsion to see his eyes. Something brilliant, if not hazy, to

remind him he wasn't looking at a corpse. Gabriel said nothing, did nothing. A shade half in life and half out.

“Bare with this a little while longer and then you will be home, Gabriel. Safe with your family.” Hannibal led him from the room with a hand at Gabriel's elbow, positive nothing of what he said was heard.

However, the frigid wind that rushed them at the hospital's entrance broke Gabriel from his trance-like state. He steadied himself and turned Katinka away from the cold. It was rather miserable out, in a long line of miserable days. The rain had turned to sleet at some point, biting and stinging when it hit exposed skin.

His companion came to a halt and Hannibal noticed where Gabriel's returning attention was drawn to. The hospital still needed their barricades up in the receiving zone of the parking lot. He looked at the crowd of shouting pigs in disgust but turned away before any of the higher skilled ones had a chance to recognize him. He tucked Gabriel and Katinka close to his side as he brought them to his black Bentley in one of the parking garages. Even if the situation annoyed him, he was pleased to see curiosity in Gabriel's clearing gaze when he glanced back over his shoulder.

“Reporters,” Hannibal explained. “*Vultures*. Come to catch a glimpse of the victims and survivors of the crash.”

“There were others?”

“Some. A few died after they arrived. Many more are still in critical condition.”

“I don't want to be photographed. I don't want them posting her picture all over.”

“Of course.”

If anyone managed to catch a glimpse of Gabriel or Katinka, let alone a photo, they would be dead before the film could be developed or uploaded. Hannibal smiled at the thought, imagining what all he could do with a snooping journalist. A roast would be nice for this weather. Perhaps a pie. Gabriel saw to settling himself in the front passenger seat while Hannibal took care of Katinka. A commotion in the parking lot drew Hannibal's attention once more as he came to the driver's side door. The crowd was focused on another group leaving the grounds. A perfect diversion while they set out.

“How long have I been in the hospital?” Gabriel was once more in a talkative mood as Hannibal turned on the heater and adjusted his seat belt.

“Eighteen days.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Seventeen days.” Hannibal turned to Gabriel, taking in the perspiration on his forehead and the flush to his cheeks. He held himself rigid in the leather seat, hand resting against his stomach. It had been several hours since his last dose of painkillers. Before he woke. If he

wasn't in a great amount of pain already, he would be soon. Hannibal reached into his pocket for some of the pills they sent with Gabriel. “The rest of your family is eager to meet you, Gabriel. However, when my uncle was notified about the crash, I arrived ahead to help make any arrangements at the hospital. After I learned of Nigel, and your condition, I felt it best they remain at home. I didn't know if you would be returning with me when I left.”

“I don't want to stay, but I don't think I should be leaving now. Is it normal to be released so soon after this kind of injury?”

Just climbing out of his stupor and Gabriel was already very observant. Not as unaware as he seemed. And there was a current of unease in his voice. Did he sense the possibility of threat from Hannibal? Was it a familiar static that came off of Nigel, as well? It pleased him to consider it. Hannibal retrieved a bottle of water from his glove compartment to pass to Gabriel, along with two painkillers. “I pulled some strings. I assure you, they released you and Katinka into excellent hands.”

“You're a doctor.” It wasn't a question and not quite a guess.

“Surgeon.”

Hannibal didn't let on that he was disappointed in Gabriel's general lack of knowledge concerning Nigel's family but he could tell Gabriel picked up on it. It wasn't the man's fault. Not really. Nigel purposely kept them apart. At least he told Gabriel he had a brother and sister. How much else he knew Hannibal would learn shortly. A tired, frustrated sigh escaped Gabriel and he scrubbed at his face, ignoring his cuts and bruises. He seemed to gather himself before looking at Hannibal.

“Does the rest of Nigel's family know? About me.”

“I called a few days ago, when you still slept, to tell them that you would make a complete physical recovery. The rooms for you and Katinka had already been prepared. Weeks ago. We had all been looking forward to meeting Nigel's new wife and daughter.” Hannibal couldn't help the slight jab. The first real poke. Just to see what it would get him.

“Will that be a problem? I'm not what they were expecting. I'm not Nigel's wife.”

“I told them. The Lecters are a progressive bunch, Gabriel. You will find nothing but sanctuary with us.”

Hannibal knew the moment the words left his mouth how much of a potential half-truth they were. They were meant to disarm, charm. Lull into a sense of security. Whether it was false, he couldn't say just yet. Beside him, he could sense Gabriel was anything but mollified. He could feel walls being built and fortified. Very rarely did others impress Hannibal. Not only was Gabriel perceptive but there was something else about him. It put Hannibal the slightest bit on edge. The notion that if Gabriel could feel, even if just a fraction, the threat Hannibal posed to him—what did that make Nigel's beloved husband?

* * * * *

Fresh air and the long drive did Gabriel some good. He slept for most of the rainy drive into the country. Only after Hannibal stopped the car to unlock the heavy iron gate to his family's property did Gabriel rouse from his deep slumber. He missed most of the scenery they past, but now Gabriel took in everything with a hungry curiosity that Hannibal was happy to see. Perhaps Gabriel wouldn't be in too much of a stupor where he couldn't meet the rest of Nigel's family or have a proper meal.

Gabriel was taken by the landscape. He stared out the water-speckled window at the green fields and woods beyond. Their grapevines looked to be in perfect condition. Hannibal would have to remember to check on their personal label, taste this year's supply. He was fantasizing about a generous glass of wine, and maybe a steaming shower later in the evening, when he heard a quiet gasp from beside him as he pulled up to the main entrance.

“Is something wrong,” Hannibal asked.

“This is a castle.”

“Yes.” Hannibal looked up at his ancestral home. They were able to keep most of the original stonework on the outside. Weather and age gave the entire structure a dramatic, romantic, flare to the black rock. It could appear cold and foreboding, but Hannibal knew of the warmth beyond the threshold. He pulled his gaze from it to Gabriel and found the man staring with nervous wonder and almost rolled his eyes at his timidity. “We *are* in Europe.”

Gabriel gave Hannibal a *look* and he couldn't help giving him one back. He was awake enough to not appreciate Hannibal's slight sass. It was thrilling to see something other than despair in Gabriel's haunted gaze at the same time it was frustrating. Hannibal was a patient man. Very rarely, if ever, did he lose his calm and yet he could feel his tight control thinning. Did Nigel tell him nothing? Gabriel knew enough to get by, but he was incredibly ignorant of so many things. He didn't know about Nigel's twin. He didn't know anything of Mischa. Or Robertus and Murasaki, only they were distant shades in his husband's life. He wasn't aware of Hannibal being a doctor. And now, it seemed, Gabriel was completely caught off-guard concerning Nigel's heritage.

Hannibal couldn't hide the frustration in his sharp exhale before explaining, “My family is an old one. This estate reaches back centuries. Older still was the original Lecter Castle that was destroyed during the war. Before Count Lecter, my father, died, he officially relocated our holdings here for my uncle Robertus' ease of oversight.”

“I had no idea Nigel came from such a wealthy family. Or that he was technically a count.” There was something in Gabriel's tone. A wistful humor.

Hannibal thought of the man Gabriel knew. No, he imagined Gabriel had no idea who Nigel was. Not really. “It seems my brother kept a lot from you.”

Hannibal left the warmth of the car to help Gabriel out of his side. Gabriel had nothing but the clothes he wore and the baby in his arms. Hannibal would see to his own luggage later. He helped him up the steps and opened the door for him. Pride and pleasure swelled in his chest when Gabriel came to a stop in the foyer.

Over the years, they had worked hard to restore and improve the castle. He hadn't lived on the grounds in any kind of permanence for a very long time, but it had been a home to him once. Warm and inviting. A sanctuary for the Lecters. A place where they could display all their personal tastes. Hannibal had had quite a large hand in decorating. The antler chandelier that hung over them was a personal touch of his that he was exceptionally fond of.

Everything on the first floor exuded warmth and comfort. Gleaming wood floors covered with the softest rugs. Fresh flowers in antique vases sent a constant cloud of sweet fragrance into the air. The walls paneled with wood a few shades darker than the floors were adorned with beautiful paintings and hangings. Heirloom and otherwise. His family's history permeated from the very stones and it pleased him to see Gabriel look to everything with a curious appreciation.

The door to the main sitting room opened and Hannibal smiled at the vision before him. As stylish and lovely as ever. Not a wrinkle on her brown slacks or white blouse. Every shining strand of blond hair in place. One would never be able to tell she spent the day finishing her move or running around on the whims of her brother. Mischa came to Gabriel and Hannibal watched as they both took the other in. Gabriel noted the differences and similarities between them all and Nigel. He knew her for who she was on looks alone. Still, it gave Hannibal great pleasure to take Mischa by the hand and bring her closer.

“Gabriel, this is your sister-in-law, Mischa. Mischa, this is Gabriel and Katinka.”

Mischa glanced to Hannibal and he smiled as she took in everything he didn't say. This was the first time Gabriel had heard her name. Turning her attention back to Gabriel, her golden eyes swept over his wounded form. She took her cues from Hannibal and spoke to their guest in English.

“Hallo, Gabriel. It's so nice to finally meet you and the little one.” Her touches were reverent as she trailed her hand along Katinka's blanket, as if afraid to touch the delicate baby within. The same care and affection were in her touches as she reached up to wrap one of Gabriel's curls around her dainty finger. “It seems Nigel had excellent taste.”

While Mischa admired Gabriel, Hannibal went to receive his aunt as she came from the sitting room, as well. He kissed her hand in greeting before he led her to Gabriel. There were questions in her dark eyes and Hannibal wordlessly promised he would tell her soon all the thoughts troubling him that he didn't have the heart to say over the phone to Robertus during their nightly calls.

“This is my aunt, Lady Murasaki.”

Murasaki gave Hannibal's hand a squeeze before she laid hers over Gabriel's. Her touch was comforting if brief as she didn't wish to overwhelm him and her gentle smile seemed to ease the growing anxiety in Gabriel. “Murasaki is fine, Gabriel. Welcome home.”

The sound of footsteps brought all of their attention to the spiral staircase that led up to the higher levels of the castle. Hannibal stepped close to Gabriel and smiled as he watched his uncle take in the sight of him and Katinka.

“This is my uncle Robertus, Gabriel.”

Robertus had waited so long for this. Almost thirty years, to be exact. Hannibal watched his uncle approach Gabriel and Katinka with a growing ache in his chest. Robertus was no longer in his prime but was still a handsome, imposing man. The recent events that befell them aged him. More silver to his blonde hair. Shadows darkened disarming, bicolored eyes. He looked smaller to Hannibal. Frail. Tired. But then Robertus took Gabriel by the chin, gentle and confident in his touches, to tilt his face up to look him over and Hannibal watched the strain from the past two weeks fade from him.

Robertus pulled Gabriel into a soft hug before pulling away just enough to run his fingers along Katinka's head. “I had been looking forward to meeting you, Gabriel. I was so happy Nigel was finally coming home.” He gave one more tender touch to Gabriel's jaw before he stepped back. “I am terribly sorry for all you have lost, but I hope you stay and find all that you need here.”

“Would you like to hold your grandniece?”

Hannibal smiled, pleased that Gabriel offered so easily to hand over Katinka. Robertus and Murasaki cooed and fawned over the baby as soon as Robertus took her. They left for the sitting room. Hannibal would talk with Robertus later. After all the excitement and Gabriel was seen to. Mischa came to him, kissing him his usual greeting and giving him a hug for added comfort.

Hannibal chuckled as she gripped him harder and he laid another kiss against the golden waves of her hair. “Are you well, darling?” It could be considered rude, speaking a language their guest wasn't fluent in, but Gabriel didn't seem to notice as he watched Katinka disappear from view.

“I'm just happy you're home.” Mischa pulled away and glanced to Gabriel before looking to Hannibal and squeezed his hand. “We'll talk more later.”

Hannibal promised they would and waited until Mischa joined Robertus and Murasaki before coming to Gabriel. He took up Gabriel's hand to remove his glove before sliding the coat off his tired frame. “I suggest you take it easy this evening. Join the others in the sitting room to rest. Later you will be helped upstairs.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“I have to start preparing dinner. This time, I insist you eat. You've had nothing but water today. It's not good for you to take medicine on an empty stomach.”

Gabriel looked like he would rather do anything else instead of sit through a meal. He didn't argue, though. Hannibal smiled to himself as he nudged Gabriel towards the sitting room and he took a few grudging steps towards the sound of the quiet, excited chatter coming from within. He was too exhausted, emotionally and physically, to argue. At least in that this ordeal had been easy. Hannibal set his thoughts and worries aside as he rolled his sleeves up and made his way to the kitchen. Everything else he would deal with as it inevitably came to him.

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I think would make Hannibal so dangerous is, not just that he's charming, but he's very social. He has lots of connections that help get what he needs and that, I think, is one of the major points of *why* he is so social. There's always a connection he can call on for any kind of rainy day he may have. I wanted to explore that, so expect more glimpses into the people he knows which enables him to move the pieces on the board to exactly where he wants them. :)

Okay, so, "Gabriel" is awake and giving Hannibal all sorts of ideas and doubts. :D

I hope this was good. I feel like I just put a jumbled, horrible mess out into the world. I hope you all liked the spin on this. I promise it gets better.

Thanks for stopping by! Until next Thursday! Please try to stay safe, sane and happy!

~CReed

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! There is quite a bit of dialogue and scenes from Mr. Lecter in this chapter. I promise, I added new content that I think will make up for the re-run quality of the chapter. This is actually one of my favorite chapters so far, for some very specific reasons. You'll see. ;) Before I let you get to it, I wanted to thank Jor_ishere, EmilyElm, Stralovat and TurtleKidtheWoolgatherer for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments last chapter. You all are very kind and thoughtful and I really do appreciate you for taking a chance on this story.

Please enjoy, dear readers!

One last note: There's a tiny bit of harsh, homophobic language in part of this chapter. It makes sense in the grand scheme of things, but just thought I'd give a heads up. Again, it's going to make sense. You'll see. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three

It wasn't his home, the kitchen he was used to, but Hannibal fell into the comforting rhythm of cooking as soon as he stepped over the threshold to the the room. Long ago, he had helped Murasaki prepare family meals here. Listening to patient, if stern, direction from his aunt as he assisted her. Stirring boiling pots over the flame of the stove. Waiting ever patiently for delicate fare to come out of the oven. He and Mischa had helped with the redesign, and he had extra say when it came to the kitchen and dining room—but this was not his personal haven. It was, however, the place he began to hone his skills in the culinary arts and explore his growing palate.

He was happy to find that Mischa did exactly what he told her over the phone, and followed his notes perfectly. The pot on the stove burbled beautifully along and when he removed the lid he let the fragrant steam settle his nerves. As he stirred the soup, checked the flesh of the pleasingly purplish-black hued chicken and sampled the rich broth for any lack of seasoning, Hannibal pushed all of his concerns and suspicions away. For the first time in two weeks he felt stable. Clear-headed.

As he removed the sachet stuffed with herbs from the pot and cut apart the chicken, light chatter drifted to him from the dining room. They had excellent timing. Hannibal washed up and put his jacket back on, smoothing any wrinkle or stray hair back into place. His family was seated and passing around the rolls he set out earlier by the time he brought the first steaming bowls to Robertus and Murasaki.

“I'm happy you were able to get the ingredients I asked for on such short notice, Mischa,” Hannibal thanked his sister as he set a bowl before her.

“How could I refuse? You were adamant about needing a certain kind of chicken and berries. I don't ever want to be on the receiving end of your disappointment, especially when it comes to your dinner plans.”

“Silkie chicken soup, with ginger, dates and goji berries,” Hannibal explained their meal as he set a serving before Gabriel.

Gabriel thanked him but did not take up his spoon to try the dish. Quiet, distracted. His forlorn attention was entirely stolen by the place Hannibal had set for Nigel. Some cultures might have seen the tradition as macabre or depressing, the setting of the table for a deceased loved one, but Hannibal couldn't bear the thought of leaving Nigel out of their first meal together. It pleased Hannibal that Gabriel was familiar with the concept. As Hannibal finished serving and sat across from Gabriel he watched him finally focus on his supper. Gabriel breathed in the herbal steam, soothed by the heat and scent. He took a testing sip of the broth and Hannibal happily noted the flash of returning hunger in Gabriel's tired gaze. The spices and herbs were once prized for their medicinal properties. They would soothe the stomach and return fire to the blood. And whatever Hannibal made was far more nourishing than anything the hospital could ever hope to give Gabriel.

Hannibal was content to let the conversation flow around him as he ate. His family tried to bring him up to date on all that had happened while he was away, but his attention kept returning to Gabriel. Every time he looked around, studied his environment, Hannibal noticed. Sharp eyes took in everything, marking and making note. Hannibal averted his stare once more and focused instead on the centerpiece Mischa chose for the evening. Nothing as elaborate as his arrangements, but he appreciated the simple beauty and care taken to select the flowers. Mischa had never warmed to Murasaki's lessons in ikebana like he had, but it couldn't be said she didn't apply herself when she tried.

Purple anemones and sprays of white freesia. Appropriate for the occasion, if not a somber reminder of the recent events in their lives. White freesia often symbolized innocence. Purity. Anemones signified the death of a loved one. Hannibal took up his wine, a small smile hidden behind the crystal, as he thought on the wildflower's other meanings. Bad luck and ill omens. He glanced up just as Gabriel did the same and their eyes met for the briefest of contact.

The anemone could mean anticipation.

“You don't have to be social, Gabriel. You have been through so much in the last few days, but is there anything you wish to know?” Murasaki's soft words interrupted Hannibal's thoughts and he focused on stirring his soup, waiting to hear if Gabriel's awakening curiosity could coax him into conversation.

“You have a beautiful home,” he offered to Murasaki and Robertus. “I never guessed the size of your estate. Seems secluded, though. Do you work from home, or do you travel far when you're not here?”

“Thank you. I am proud of my family's ancestral home. Hannibal and Mischa have done wonders with Murasaki to make it not so cold and lonely.” Robertus smiled and rewarded Gabriel's interest with open warmth and an encouraging smile. “I am busy enough keeping our accounts organized without having a job, any longer. Before I retired, I was a banker. Tell me if you find this all too boring. I do not know what dear Nigel might have told you.”

“Not at all. I'd love to know anything you want to tell me.”

“My love is a true Renaissance woman.” Robertus kissed Murasaki's hand. “Philosopher, musician, poet and designer.”

“I experiment with many arts and disciplines,” Murasaki explained. “Though I am not as skilled as our Mischa.”

Mischa only shrugged, interested in her food more than praise. “Publish a few books, paint a few trees—suddenly people act as if you're William Blake.”

“You are too modest. Mischa's landscapes are highly-sought pieces.” High praise and recognition from Murasaki was something an artist would kill for. Mischa only smirked and continued eating.

“The large painting in the sitting room. Above the fireplace.”

The quiet observation from Gabriel captured everyone's attention. Mischa was shocked at his deduction but charmed all the same. “Yes. There is a meadow I like to visit often on this land. One day, as I sat watching shafts of sunlight break through the dark clouds passing overhead, a stag came out of the trees. Its antlers were covered with moss and flowers. I had never seen anything like it before. Nor have I since.”

“It's beautiful.”

“Thank you, Gabriel. It's my favorite work.” Mischa abandoned the last of her meal and smiled at Gabriel over her wine. “And what of you? Nigel never had the desire nor patience for art, but it seems something still attracted him to the creative. Did you steal his heart with your music, along with your pretty face?”

Hannibal's body settled at the question, readying for Gabriel's response. It was small talk, mundane. Nigel had told them very little. Only that his Gabi was beautiful and a talented musician. A cellist. When Hannibal found out, he wouldn't deny his surprise. Out of all of them, Nigel had barely a passing interest in the arts. He instead excelled at numbers, had a knack for reading people and profiting off how he played his hand with them. Perhaps it was simply a chance meeting between the two. An instant spark. Hannibal watched Gabriel, the seconds it took him to think of what to say, and silently compelled Gabriel to respond. His answer determined the remainder of Gabriel's stay, Hannibal realized.

“Yes, I was a musician. The cello, mainly. I don't play for the symphony anymore. With Katinka and everything...I don't have any family. Nothing important was keeping me anchored in the states. So, when I was offered a job to work with an orchestra in Bucharest, I took it. A few months in to my life in Romania, the symphony was to play at a banquet one

of Nigel's venues was hosting. That was four years ago, we'd been together, in some way, ever since."

"That is lovely," Murasaki said, smiling sadly at the idea. "I am happy to learn he found someone he felt so deeply for. Nigel hardly kept in contact. In fact, up until three months ago, we didn't know Nigel was in such a committed relationship, let alone had a child."

"Yes. Nigel never mentioned you." Hannibal could no longer contain his curiosity, the growing suspicion he felt. He didn't mean to voice them just yet but there was something about Gabriel that made him throw his usual caution aside. Once he started, he found he couldn't stop addressing some of what had bothered him for two weeks. "Is that how he was to the rest of the world, as well? Keeping a vague shroud around his life? Around you?" Gabriel settled his gaze on him over a bouquet of purple petals. Cool eyes, their own curiosity matching Hannibal's. He took the challenge for what it was and stated the obvious shadow to Nigel and Gabriel's relationship. "Romania is not a friendly place to gay couples."

"We managed."

"You're not wearing a ring. But Nigel wore one. Did you live separately? Or were you together under the guise of roommates?"

There was a flash of something in Gabriel's eyes. Appraising. Commending. Inviting. "We managed," was all he chose to say. "We were together, and we didn't need approval in the eyes of the government. Nigel didn't need anyone's approval."

Hannibal felt something inside him stir at the jab. Something awakening that had slept for too long rumbled into awareness at the small smile that ticked up the corner of Gabriel's lips. He took a sip of his wine, savoring the tart warmth of it as he kept his eyes on Gabriel. "And Katinka? How did she come about? Between two men, a pregnancy has to be meticulously planned, I'm sure."

"We had a surrogate. Katinka is Nigel's."

Of course. Gabriel had an answer for every question, as he should. Practical. Responses that were designed to stopper curiosity and yet Hannibal felt he was being led. Exactly where Gabriel wanted him to search. Hannibal found the right room, but had been tempted to the wrong corner. "How lucky you are, then, to have found someone to pass on both your exact coloring. Katinka's eyes are a startling blue, just like yours."

"Enough with your interview, Hannibal." Mischa's reproving evaporated the tension of their exchange instantly. She was bored with his round of questioning and looked to be finishing off a bottle of wine. "Don't be rude. Gabriel would probably rather not dwell on such things at the moment. Always so curious, brother."

"Too curious, you have often said," he allowed. "I'm never rude. However, you are right. I'm sorry, Gabriel. I shouldn't bombard you with questions, remind you of Nigel right now."

"It's fine. I need to be reminded of Nigel."

There came that quiet timidity again. It wasn't an act. A germ of genuine feeling in a swirl of glamour and misdirection. Hannibal didn't know what to make of him. Not yet. He nodded to Gabriel, the current peace between them understood. “Even so, you need a reprieve from stressful thoughts, even of Nigel. There will be time for my questions later.” It was a promise he intended to collect on soon.

* * * * *

Hannibal found Gabriel back in the main sitting room alone, holding Katinka. Mischa offered to clean up the remains of their supper while he saw to Gabriel. Robertus knew Hannibal would seek him out when he was ready and disappeared somewhere in the castle to see to his own affairs in the meantime. Once more, he found himself guide and caregiver to the quiet man burping his sleepy daughter. He led Gabriel up the stairs, slowing his pace to give Gabriel time to take in his surroundings.

The second floor had been his and his sibling's territory for years after they moved in with their uncle and aunt. Robertus never imposed upon them, wanting this to be a space to make their own. Their sanctuary. Their haven from the ruins they fled from. It was warm and inviting, footsteps kept muffled by lush rugs along the old wooden floors and family pictures and heirlooms filling the walls. Hannibal could just make out the laughter echoing from the past along the halls, the whispers of shared hopes and secrets, and felt a pleasant warmth begin to stir in his chest at the thought of Katinka adding her own happy memories to this place.

Gabriel began to lag behind, curious and exhausted, so Hannibal drew his attention back to him with a small tour. “You'll be staying in Nigel's old room. I had it all aired out. You should find everything you need for Katinka. If not, let me know. My room is down the hall, just there, on the left. Don't hesitate to come to any of us should you need anything.”

“Thank you. Is Mischa's room near yours?”

“Mischa commandeered the caretaker's cottage, years ago. Robertus and Murasaki have the entire third floor to themselves. We'll give you a proper tour when you're not so exhausted.”

Hannibal held the door for Gabriel as they came to the darkened bedroom. He watched Gabriel as he took in his surroundings once the lights came on to a soft glow. The room was, essentially, just as Nigel left it. Though, it was missing his personal touches. Robertus and Murasaki made the room to their taste, to house guests, when they accepted Nigel wasn't returning any time soon. The bedroom set was all heavy mahogany pieces. Polished to a warm, dark shine. Designs of vines and flowers set with mother of pearl. Older than Hannibal's great great grandparents.

Gabriel looked as if he was afraid to touch anything. He relaxed once he spotted the desk by the window where a phone sat plugged in and connected. Perhaps he and Nigel furnished their home in Bucharest with a more modern style. Hannibal watched him a few moments more, a tender kind of amusement growing at his obvious discomfort at being around such finery. The first show of appreciation for his surroundings only occurred when Hannibal showed him the nursery.

It was a small parlor off to the side of Gabriel's room. Hannibal was quite proud of the hand he had in preparing it for Katinka. Nothing of Hannibal and Nigel's childhood belongings survived the neglect and harsh times at their family home, nor did Mischa's, but Hannibal still had furniture he was able to pull from Robertus' store rooms. Mischa and Murasaki helped him restore the ebony crib and rocking chair. The changing station was new, but it had been no trouble to find a style and wood to match. He hadn't known Nigel and Gabriel's preferences, so took it upon himself to choose soft lavenders and violets for Katinka's bedding.

The stuffed lamb in the corner of her crib had been an impulsive purchase, but he didn't regret it. Hannibal reached up to set the mobile of stars and comets gently turning before he stepped toward Gabriel and held his hands out for Katinka. “May I?”

As the evening grew later, Gabriel and Katinka's comfort lessened. This was the longest Gabriel had been awake in two weeks. It was a commendable effort, but his exhaustion and pain were beginning to show. Katinka was in a similar state. Overwhelmed by the excitement of the day and all the new people in her life. She grew fussier as the minutes ticked by and Gabriel passed her over without any hesitation, more than happy to have someone else gentle her for a bit.

Katinka whimpered and wriggled in Hannibal's arms. He comforted her as best he could, praising her for being so good after such a long day and kissing her forehead. All of her supplies for changing were right where he left them. It took no time to clean her and put her in a fresh nappy. Even when she tried to get away from the pajamas he selected for her. His reflexes were much faster than hers and she stopped trying to kick him when he made a gentle sound of reprimand. Clever girl, already responding to non-verbal cues. He couldn't help smiling at the pale yellow of her onesie. The color suited her.

As Hannibal kissed her hands and brought her to her crib, he felt Gabriel watching him. For a moment he feared he unintentionally hurt him. Afraid Gabriel didn't see him but Nigel caring for his daughter, reminded in an instant that he would never witness such a thing again, but then he noticed the look in Gabriel's eyes. He wasn't sad. Engrossed, but not because of any familiarity in the act itself. Again that prickling, tickling sense of being seen rushed over him. For a moment, Hannibal could see that Gabriel knew what he was capable of and yet he allowed him near his baby.

And then that feeling passed over them, gone like a faint breeze. Gabriel looked away as Hannibal tucked Katinka in.

Gabriel came quietly as Hannibal brought him into his bedroom. The fire had been lit to make the room cozy for their arrival. Sleep should come easy to Gabriel. Hannibal gestured to one of the chairs near the fire. “Wait here, please.”

Hannibal left to gather everything he would need to check over Gabriel's injuries. He told Mischa to stock the bathroom with supplies and he was pleased to find everything he asked for laid out on the counter. When he returned, with a glass of water and another dose of painkillers in-hand, he found Gabriel sitting rigid with a hand once more against his abdomen. Gabriel gladly took the pills, swallowing them at once and finishing the water in a few gulps. His cheeks were rosy and there was a sheen to his forehead, but he had yet to

voice his discomfort. A high threshold for pain. An admirable trait. One that tempted him to test. Still, it was now Hannibal's job to see to what he could, and Gabriel suffering wasn't a part of any of his agendas.

Hannibal knelt before Gabriel's chair to unwrap his hand. None of the playful suspicion from dinner colored the air between them. Gabriel stayed quiet, letting the medicine work through his system. Though, he couldn't help the noise of shocked distress when he laid eyes on the injury for the first time. His wrist was still doubled in size, covered in black and purple bruises. Whatever trauma he endured could have easily snapped the joint, but he escaped only with a severe sprain. Gabriel's fingers weren't as damaged. There was still some swelling and discoloration, but they would look better in a few days.

“Can you move your fingers? Like this?” He held his hand out and moved his fingers in a slow up and down motion.

Gabriel tried to mimic his movements but could only manage a slight twitch of each without wincing. “That's all I can do.”

“That's fine.” Hannibal nodded as he reset his splint and began to wrap fresh gauze around his hand. “I suspected as much. I just had to make sure we're still dealing only with a sprain. It looks good, considering. Now,” Hannibal placed his hand gently onto the armrest before leaning back to give Gabriel room to move about, “Open your shirt, please.” It was promising to see Gabriel managed the buttons of his shirt on his own. When he finished, Hannibal sat forward to run a firm but careful touch along the bandages on his stomach. “Does this hurt?”

“It's sore. Like I had an intense workout.”

Hannibal smiled as he continued to feel for any hardness or swelling, anything that hurt worse than it should. “In a way, you did. Your muscles aren't used to the trauma they endured, including the surgery and stitches. You'll be sore for a while still. However, your bandages are dry and clean. I see no sign of discharge or bleeding. We can change them tomorrow.” He leaned up onto his knees and slid his hands gently around the back of Gabriel's head. “If you'll allow me a few minutes more.”

“Is it bad?” Gabriel asked when he noticed Hannibal was examining the cut on his forehead.

“When you were brought in, yes. Quite a nasty cut from here to here.” He traced the stitches that went from forehead to right temple. “Whatever hit you chipped bone. But the stitches were neat and small. You'll have a handsome scar, after it all heals.”

Gabriel scoffed at that as Hannibal stood. Not one for looking on the bright side, then. “Thank you.”

Hannibal busied himself with returning the extra bandages and gauze to the bathroom. “I require no thanks. You were released into my care. Think of this as any other examination.” He found Gabriel standing with a wince and motioned towards the room he just left. “Toiletries have been set in the bathroom for you. There are clothes in the armoire and dresser. Your medication is in the bathroom cabinet behind the mirror.” Before he could take a step away from him, Gabriel stopped him with weak fingers around his wrist.

“Thank you,” he repeated. “I know you have your doubts. About everything. I don't blame you. I just—You've been kind, when you don't need to be.”

It was the first admission that Gabriel knew Hannibal didn't trust him. They had danced around it from the moment Gabriel woke. Gentle swipes, testing bites, at each other. Just to see what the other would do. Gabriel's words soaked into his head and heart, sweet and warm treacle that filled the cracks inside him that formed over the past two weeks. Was he kind? Was it kindness when he could do nothing but bring this man into his home to care and provide for? Was Hannibal kind when he would easily break Gabriel down into nothing but dust if it meant having Nigel instead? Gabriel knew this, as well. Hannibal had a feeling Gabriel would let him.

There was an uptick in Gabriel's pulse. The scent of panic blooming from him. Hannibal watched him as Gabriel studied him in turn. Gabriel opened his mouth as if to speak again. Apologies or confessions, Hannibal knew not and he suddenly did not want either.

He broke free of the gentle hold around his wrist to brush Gabriel's hair away from his forehead. “You're family.” For now, that was all that would stay his hand. “Goodnight, Gabriel.”

* * * * *

Softly playing Rock N' Roll from the 70's echoed along the staircase leading up to the third floor. The lights were still on in the hall as he came to the landing. His uncle and aunt waited up for him. The music grew louder as he walked into Robertus' study. Robertus was at his desk, reading on his computer. Murasaki joined him in silent company, sitting on the cushioned bench by the window and sipped chamomile tea. When she saw him, she leaned to pour him a steaming cup. He took it but he did not sit. Instead, he looked out over the dark fields beyond Robertus' window and began to fully gather his thoughts.

Robertus stopped humming to the faintly playing music and leaned back in his chair to watch Hannibal. Already his uncle was taken by Gabriel, it would be clear to anyone, yet he hadn't spoken up during their meal when Hannibal's questions and comments took on an interrogatory nature. He didn't say anything after they all left the dining room. Hannibal assumed Robertus would wait until they could speak in private, the subject delayed but not forgotten, and he wasn't disappointed.

“Judging by that interesting display of antagonistic curiosity earlier, I think I can safely deduce you were keeping things from me during our nightly calls while you were away.”

Hannibal smiled and turned to face Robertus. “Not with malicious intent. I wanted to be confident in some of my suspicions before I came to you.” Robertus only waited, ever patient to hear what he had to say. Finally, Hannibal was surrounded by those it was safe to speak freely all his troubles from these last long weeks. “I don't think Nigel was married to Gabriel.”

“I assume you mean more than just what silly laws would not allow?” Robertus accepted Hannibal's musings with calm curiosity, as always, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Yes. It's not just a technicality. I don't believe Gabriel was Nigel's. He couldn't have been. I never knew Nigel to be attracted to men, not even a passing interest. True, he could have experimented later in life, but I find it hard to believe he would ever be comfortable openly having a committed relationship with another man.”

Robertus shrugged and clasped his hands together in his lap. “That doesn't make such a thing impossible. You've kept an even bigger secret concerning your own *proclivities* your whole life. Hiding a relationship with a gay lover and a child shared between them is a cream puff compared.”

Hannibal set his empty cup aside. “Nigel kept his life shrouded from public scrutiny. The times I checked on him, I never found anything that might have hinted at a Gabi, let alone Katinka existing in his life.”

Robertus gave him an indulgent, amused, smile and Hannibal was starting to not appreciate feeling like a child under his uncle's stare. “Could that be the root of your suspicions? The fact that your brother was able to keep so much from you?”

“You know that's not it. You also know my instincts very rarely misguide me.”

“And your instincts are telling you we have an impostor amongst us. What do you intend to do about that?”

“Nothing, as of now. I ask that all of you do nothing, as well. I'm still trying to piece this all together, gather my thoughts. For years, I respected Nigel's wishes to live a private life away from me and now it will take me a bit of time to find anything of interest. However, I won't stop until my curiosity is satisfied.”

“What have you done, Hannibal?”

He smiled at Murasaki's question. His aunt knew him too well. Just because he was quiet didn't mean he was idle. “I hired Lidija to find everything she can on Nigel. I'm paying extra for what she can gather concerning his spouse and Katinka.”

“That needed to be done, anyway. Nigel's final arrangements have stalled enough, we should do all we can while we wait for him to come home to us.” Murasaki approved of his initiative and stood to embrace him, pecking him softly on his cheek. “Goodnight. Don't stay up much longer, my love,” she said to Robertus as she left the room.

Robertus was already moving to follow after shutting his computer off and putting away his work. Hannibal wished his uncle a pleasant night before making his way back to the second floor. It was silent in the hall. No sound from Gabriel's room. He imagined both Gabriel and Katinka were exhausted and didn't expect to hear from them until the next day. He passed on to his bedroom without so much as a creak in a floorboard giving him away. The fire had been lit but he made no move to brighten the room further. The door shut, lock clicked in place, and Hannibal finally let his control slip away.

He tried taking a series of steadying breaths but his body still trembled with the emotions running through him. Everything from the last two weeks felt suddenly heavier on his

shoulders. He thought telling Robertus and Murasaki his concerns would have helped, freed him of the black paranoia that hung like a stone around his neck. He didn't feel better. He didn't feel unburdened. There were still countless questions swarming around his brain. The sorrow and curiosity and anger that dogged his steps hadn't eased.

It didn't help that the main reason he felt so unmoored was asleep down the hall from him.

Hannibal closed his eyes, willing himself to calm. Find his center once more. Ease his heart rate. Every time he almost succeeded, Gabriel came back into his thoughts and stole his concentration. His hands clenched tightly as they remembered the feel of Gabriel's broken body and he had to make himself relax his aching fists. He pulled up from within every moment that brought him peace. The safety of the walls of his memory palace came up around him. These halls and rooms were dedicated to everything he found beautiful, comforting. Finally, he calmed and was able to safely bring forth Gabriel once more and replay the details of the past hours.

Perhaps what disturbed him the most was the ease with which Gabriel read him. Everything unspoken but seemingly perfectly understood. From the moment hazy, haunted eyes landed on him after so long closed. Gabriel knew Hannibal didn't trust him, resented his presence as he desired Nigel's. Knew and understood. Gabriel didn't begrudge Hannibal the pain he sensed. He even seemed to regret his part in it.

This evening, after dressing his wounds and seeing to his comfort, it almost seemed like Gabriel was going to tell him something. Comfort? Confession? Something dark, something sweet? Hannibal recalled the desire to not know, to retreat, and grew frustrated at his lack of forethought. Hadn't he wanted answers? Wasn't the truth something he would have pried Gabriel's skull open for, if given the opportunity? And yet, he had pulled back, away from what he felt had been his for the taking if only he had pushed in just the right way.

The moment vanished. Once more, Gabriel shuttered himself away, made himself small and unworthy of passing consideration. *Nothing to see here, but a broken shell.* A lie. An appeasement he thought Hannibal wanted.

He focused once more on centering himself, putting Gabriel away for now. It was then that he noticed he wasn't alone.

Nigel smiled at him as he lounged in one of the embroidered chairs by the fire. He smirked as he watched Hannibal push the remnants of his feelings down and locked them away. Barely held laughter shimmered in his eyes, his growing smile. “All that effort in shoving your monster back in its box because of such a wee thing. You look like you're about to start frothing at the mouth. Are you that shocked by my beautiful Gabi? Or is it that I turned out to be a fag, just like my twin?”

Hannibal didn't take the bait and settled into his seat across from Nigel. “You were always vulgar when you wanted to be intimidating. Never mind the fact that you're wrong. Always uncouth when you were scared.” Hannibal's smirk grew to mirror Nigel's. “False bravado. What has Nigel scared, this time?”

“Fuck you.” Nigel shrugged and smiled, backing down immediately without any of his former heat. “Technically, I have nothing to be afraid of now.”

It was well-meant, his tone light and humorous, but it made a surge of emotion clog Hannibal's throat and burn his eyes. “I'm sorry we never got to meet again. Bury the past.”

Nigel snorted. “There was nothing to bury. You saw to that. Looks like all your hard work was for nothing.”

Hannibal ignored the long-running jab. After everything, their old squabble seemed insignificant. He just wanted peace with Nigel. “I need you to know, I won't stop until I find out the truth.”

“Truth about what? The train 'accident?' The 'truth' Gabi is clearly hiding?” Nigel scoffed and shook his head, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees and Hannibal didn't appreciate the condescending drawl to his words. “Sometimes, shit happens. It was a terrible way to go, and I'm sorry I left so soon, but did it occur to you that maybe I just have really shit luck? Maybe I was supposed to die all those years ago. You have to finally admit defeat and let me go.”

“Never.” The word came up out of Hannibal in a snarl and when Nigel only gave him an exasperated roll of his eyes, Hannibal leaned forward as well. “You know my instincts have never led me astray, and they are telling me something is wrong. And it's not just Gabriel," Hannibal realized. "Even now, weeks later, the authorities won't tell me anything. Tight-lipped. Unhelpful. Misdirecting. Rude.”

“We can't have that, can we? God fucking forbid Hannibal Lecter wait in line like everyone else. Must be a fucking conspiracy.”

“And Gabriel knows,” Hannibal insisted, finally voicing what all he had been mulling over. “He's hiding something,” he urged for his twin to see.

“What? Like he's not 'Gabi?'” Nigel scoffed again and leaned his head back against the chair as he shook it. “Sometimes the curtains *are just fucking blue*.”

Hannibal sighed and fell back into his chair, frustrated. “You only ever dug your heels in this hard when you knew I was right. I see that, at least, hasn't changed.” Though, he couldn't help smiling at the figure before him. “But it is wonderful to see you, even if this is all we'll ever have.”

Nigel cracked his eyes open to look over his brother and smiled, for now, all ill will put aside for one another. “Yeah.” Hannibal greedily took him in, replacing this image with the last he saw of Nigel. Silver-blond hair catching golden gleams from the gentle fire. A flashier version of Hannibal. Everything on the surface. Dangerous. Charismatic. A handsome devil shaped and molded in the same pit as Hannibal. So much more than Hannibal could ever allow of himself. Nigel watched Hannibal now, and a gentle pleading came into his voice. “I never beg anyone for anything. Just you. Don't hurt him. Please.”

A flush crackled along his nerves and Hannibal wanted to rip something apart at the raw demand. “Why are you so protective of him? Whatever Gabriel is to you, whoever he is, he's not *yours*.”

“Believe what you want. Justify all those dark, secret thoughts all you want, but keep this in mind: Gabi is the only thing Katinka has now.”

“She has us. She has her family.”

“And Gabi isn't a part of that? Watch them both and tell me they aren't connected on some higher fucking plane. Don't take that from my baby.”

Hannibal forced another deep, calming breath into his lungs and opened his eyes. He was alone in his darkened bedroom. Nigel no longer enjoyed the warmth of the fire with him. In his place were only more questions with very few answers. Hannibal set them aside, for now. It was time to retire for the evening. With Gabriel and Katinka finally home, there was still so much that needed tending to. New puzzles and concerns that retreating into his memory palace helped bring to the surface of his mind. He hadn't expected his subconscious to take the form of Nigel, but he wasn't surprised. Nigel was often more outspoken, especially when he saw a certain truth to things. He was never there to coddle Hannibal. Why should something like death change things? Ugly truths and hidden traps, but it was up to Hannibal to decipher one from the other. Nigel could only speak his truths and warnings from the confines of his mind. Hannibal could only hope he didn't have to go against his brother's wishes when the time came.

Chapter End Notes

From the get-go, when I first started working on Mr. Lecter, I had it in my head that Hannibal visits Nigel from time to time in his memory palace. I think it would be an exercise in meditation and ordering his thoughts, especially right now. With Nigel, in the safety (generally) of his own mind, Hannibal started really thinking about what all is bothering him. Aside from his grief and feelings for Gabriel, he was able to consider everything by having a conversation with Nigel. Notice, Nigel is the one to mention first Hannibal's other suspicions concerning the crash not being an accident. That was intentional and will be brought up again. ;) It was really fun to officially bring Nigel in. I hope you all like what I've done.

I hope this chapter wasn't too boring. Thanks for stopping by! Please stay safe, sane and healthy and I'll see you next Thursday!

~CReed

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! This chapter marks the beginning of the second part of the story. Before I start, I just want to thank Jor_ishere, EmilyElm and Stralovat for not only continuing wanting to read this, but for taking the time to leave me such wonderful comments. You're lovely and kind and it makes me happy to see someone enjoys this. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Act Two:

The Pitcher Plant

Chapter Four

Deep and dreamless sleep engulfed Hannibal the entire night, once he went to bed. In the morning, soft music from his alarm pulled him to consciousness. A warm, slow process that tempted him back for several minutes. As he rolled onto his back and stretched along the silk sheets, he smiled at the strangeness of it all. Hardly ever did his alarm have the chance to wake him. It was early still. He doubted anyone else was up and about. Definitely not Mischa. She would wander up to the house for brunch or later, if she was even planning to stay around the estate today; and his uncle and aunt relaxed longer, knowing to leave meals to him when he visited.

The thought of serving his family breakfast had him escaping the warmth of bed and begin his day.

He never took long in the shower. Rarely did he find lingering beneath the hot spray enticing. Time and attention were usually dedicated to what came after. With all the excitement of the day before, and the fact that he had no demanding job currently to rush off to, Hannibal did not ready his clothes before bed. He took his time now, flushed skin drying from the warmth of the cozy fireplace, as he looked over his many choices. He settled on black slacks and a shirt that was a deep coral. He studied his reflection for a moment. Every line straight and striking. Tailor made to fit the best possible way, showcase his height and broad shoulders. Next came a vest of charcoal and black. One of his favorite ties. A pocket square to match. Finally, a black jacket. He took the time to slick his hair back with a little product and check that not a strand was out of place. Hannibal admired the finished result and smiled at his reflection. Nothing on such a calm, inviting surface to hint at the turbulence to be found beneath. Hiding within layers and layers of finery and charm. Just as he wanted.

He was once more ready to face the outside world.

Hannibal was passing Gabriel's room when he heard sounds from within. The wails of a hungry, lonely baby. No other noise to suggest Gabriel was awake. Katinka whimpered and sobbed, growing more distraught the longer her cries went ignored. Hannibal cracked the door open and was met with darkness on the other side. Silently, he crept into Katinka's room to calm her.

He soothed her as much as possible when she was in obvious need of a fresh nappy and a warm bottle. Hannibal kissed her head and patted her back as he brought her to the changing table. They all had tried to prepare for her arrival but sadly, her choices of clothing were lacking. When he found out Katinka survived, he told Mischa Katinka's size and tasked her with buying some outfits. Hannibal looked through the selection, choosing a white and turquoise dress. Mischa did a fine job with the short time she had, but Hannibal made a note to supplement Katinka's wardrobe the first chance he had.

Calmer than she had been, Katinka only snuffled and clutched at his silk paisley tie once he finished dressing her and cradled her close to his chest. He smiled as the browns, silvers and oranges of the design distracted her from her hunger and fussiness.

“Let's check on your papa, before we do something about this.” He ran gentle fingers along her rumbling belly and kissed her soft cheek.

Hannibal stalked further into the room and frowned. The fire was out and had been for hours, lending the room a drafty chill. Pale light shone in and Hannibal went to shut the curtains. He paused for a moment when he noticed Gabriel. There was nothing to worry too overly much about. The younger man's breathing wasn't shallow or elevated. He slept soundly as only the very exhausted could.

Katinka cooed and gurgled against Hannibal's neck while he admired Gabriel's sleeping form. He had slept in his clothes. Only his shoes and socks were removed. His opened shirt hung off his shoulders, revealing the dark bruises that mottled his chest and torso. As swelling went down and contusions faded, his older marks were more obvious. A few scars here and there, but none more eye-catching than the one on his right shoulder. A line of raised, pale tissue that would have been a jagged tear when first given to him. Hannibal guessed a stabbing, right into the muscle. He could drive himself mad trying to guess how he came about such a wound.

Gabriel laid sprawled along one side of the mattress, head barely on the pillow and feet precariously close to the edge. Above the blankets. Passed out before he could undress or make himself comfortable. He hadn't moved once during the night.

He had yet to stir, even as his child cried. As Hannibal stood over him. So fragile. Vulnerable. A wounded thing, sleeping in a den of old bones and scraps of fur. Unaware of the danger in the shadows. Hannibal smiled at the thought, immediately amending his assessment. Not so unaware that Gabriel didn't seem to sense the potential threat Hannibal posed to him. An injured hunter, then. Licking his wounds and making himself as small and harmless as possible. Until he was strong once more.

Hannibal turned from the sight Gabriel made and left the room, pressing his smile into Katinka's sweet-smelling hair. He couldn't wait to witness Gabriel at his full strength.

By the time he came downstairs, Murasaki was already settled at the small table in the kitchen. She was drinking tea and watching the morning fog drift along the winding driveway. One look at Hannibal, at Katinka in his arms, and she abandoned her morning solitude to see to the baby herself. Soft singing accompanied his work in the kitchen as Murasaki sang to Katinka and prepared her formula. An old melody. Something she must have remembered from her own childhood. The language didn't matter. Katinka hardly fussed as she listened.

“How is Gabriel,” Murasaki asked as she tested the warmed formula on the delicate skin of her wrist.

“Sleeping as though I administered more than painkillers.” They shared a smile as Hannibal fetched the fresh loaf of challah bread he spied earlier.

“Did you?”

“I didn't feel that needed to be done.” Hannibal buttered the sliced bread after he partially hollowed out the middle of each piece. He set a large skillet over the flame of the stove. “I am not yet sure what all he is, but as of now, Gabriel isn't a threat to us.” He paused in his arrangement of a few links of blood sausage in the pan when Murasaki came to him and ran gentle fingers through the fine hair at the back of his head.

She gave his neck a comforting squeeze. “And you must not strike until you are sure, Hannibal. No matter how you rage inside for blood to be answered with blood, you must restrain yourself.”

Hannibal glanced to his aunt before he settled his gaze onto the hungry baby in her arms. It didn't take Katinka long to latch onto her bottle, content to feed as her family watched, protective and adoring. He nodded and pushed the sausages into a more precise placement. “I await Lidija's findings, I assure you.”

“Good. I feel there is much hidden from us. One puzzle solved might reveal two new ones beneath.” She stepped away and cradled Katinka closer as she made for the door. “Give our regards to Lidija, when next you speak to your old friend.”

Hannibal couldn't feel annoyed at his aunt's warnings. Any other time it would be founded. Murasaki, out of everyone, knew the desire for carnage always simmered just below his calm demeanor. In all truth, he had felt the need to tear and rend apart any foolish enough to cross his path in a disagreeable manner since his uncle called him about the accident. However, more than snuffing out the life of discourteous, mewling wretches, he loved games. Gabriel had been playing with him since he woke and Hannibal couldn't bear the thought of ending it all so soon.

Large, fresh eggs had just been cracked and spilled into each slice of bread that toasted alongside the sausages when his uncle came into the kitchen and straight for the coffee. Hannibal smiled at Robertus as he removed the sausages and divided them onto the plates. “Good morning, Robertus. You are right on time. Breakfast will be ready as soon as the eggs are done.”

Robertus only hummed in greeting, focusing entirely on the steaming cup in his hands. Drowsy and still in pajamas. Today would be a day of relaxation and resting, it seemed. He noticed the plates. Servings for two. “Will you not be joining us?”

“I suspect Gabriel will not be awake in time for breakfast. When he comes looking for Katinka, I will make him something and eat with him.”

Robertus sipped more than half his coffee, now a pale beige from all the milk he poured into it and most likely sweet enough to make Hannibal cringe, before he leaned against the island counter with a lot more awareness. “I have thought over all you told me last night.”

Hannibal chuckled. “Murasaki has already lectured me. I promise, I am not planning to harm Gabriel.”

“I trust your discretion on such matters. I find I am more curious about your concerns than your possible future reaction,” Robertus said as he set about defiling another cup of coffee. “You are adamant that Gabriel is not really married to Nigel, perhaps not even his lover. Do you believe Gabriel harmed Nigel? Acquired Katinka by some nefarious means?”

Hannibal had also thought more over his suspicions. After seeing Nigel within the comforting walls of his memory palace. The encounter had helped to organize his thoughts. He made quick work of plating the rest of their breakfast before wiping down the stove and counter. Finally, as he folded the towel and pushed the plates towards Robertus, he turned to him. “I realized last night that I have two problems that need quick resolve. The first and most pressing, once I took the time to gather my thoughts, is the accident itself.”

Robertus stole one of the sausages to nibble as he took in his words. “You feel there is something to it? Other than the obvious?”

“Yes.” Hannibal remained calm and poised as ever, no matter how strange he knew his claim would seem. “I have found this whole ordeal bizarre.”

“In what way?” Robertus didn't doubt him, he was merely curious to know his thoughts.

“I have yet to hear back from the police. There is a certain chaos that follows an event such as the accident, I understand, but this is different. Honestly, I expected to have Nigel home already. I identified him. They have no need to keep him. Whenever I do manage to make contact with the administrators of the hospital, they direct me to detectives in charge of the overall investigation. When I track them down, they give me nothing.”

“They are hiding something,” Robertus completed Hannibal's conclusion. “It could be that they are hiding the details of faulty mechanics or someone was inattentive at their job.”

“I am missing something. A detail that would explain everything.”

Robertus smiled, encouraging and warm. “It will come to you. Don't let it take over your life. In the meantime, focus your energy on other things. What is your second problem?”

“The unease I feel whenever I think of Gabriel in a relationship with Nigel. When I look at him, I feel a quiet power thrumming just beneath the surface of what he allows us to see.”

“A threat?”

“The possibility of a threat, but not necessarily to us. I don't know if Nigel experienced it first-hand.” Admitting his ignorance was irksome, but if he could show weakness to anyone it was to his uncle.

Robertus traced the gold accents along his glass with a careful touch. “What will you do, if you find out what you fear to be true?”

“Whatever needs to be done.” Hannibal couldn't help smiling as he gathered the plates to take to the dining room. “I find everyone's distress for Gabriel rather amusing. How quickly we form attachments.”

Robertus followed with a pitcher of orange juice to set on the table. “Like most of this family's trying times, I will leave it to you to do what you think is best. Still, I can't help but be intrigued. Such an interesting little bird who has found his way to us.” They returned to the kitchen to gather everything else for the morning meal and Robertus smiled at Hannibal over the remaining spread, mismatched eyes fond and teasing all at once. Hannibal felt like a boy whenever Robertus regarded him in such a way. “That's where you and I differ the most, Hannibal. I see a beautiful, wounded bird and want to see it fly once more. I am not afraid to crush the poor thing if I have to. You, on the other hand, will always want to crush it, even as you admire its plumage and delight in its song.”

* * * * *

Late morning sun shone through the large windows of the main sitting room on the first floor. No need for any of the electric lighting to be on. The coziness within was perfectly illuminated by the lovely autumn weather. The sound of stringed instruments played softly from the stereo tucked to the side of the room, accompanied by the laughter of a delighted baby. It was music Hannibal was quickly becoming addicted to. He couldn't help smiling whenever Katinka shrieked with giggles or Murasaki answered with her own playfulness even as his attention stayed firm on his tablet, reading over emails and checking in with the likes of Lidija and the head of the hospital that he spirited his charges away from.

“Good morning, Gabriel. I hope you weren't alarmed when you didn't find Katinka in bed.”

Murasaki's pleasant greeting finally stole his gaze from Vidas' check-in. Lidija must be busy if she was leaving correspondence to her brother and mostly silent business partner.

“Good morning. Only for a second before I remembered where we were. Thank you for seeing to her.” Gabriel came quietly into the room, afraid of overstepping whatever boundaries he thought separated him from his in-laws. He took in Katinka, relaxing only when he found her clean, clothed, fed and joyful. Just as she should be.

Hannibal had yet to be noticed, so he took the opportunity to watch his family's interactions with their guest. Murasaki behaved no different than she had the night before. Courteous and

kind. Warm and welcoming. Even knowing of Hannibal's doubts, she never gave anything away that would make Gabriel suspect. Such a remarkable huntress. She taught him a lot over the years.

“Katinka was crying early this morning. When Hannibal checked on you both, you were deep asleep. He took Katinka for her breakfast, so you could keep sleeping.”

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't hear anything.”

Gabriel's apology urged Hannibal into finally moving. He set his tablet aside and rose to greet him. “You needed your rest.” The idea that Gabriel should apologize for resting after what he'd been through was ridiculous and slightly endearing. He looked him over, appreciating the dark slacks and green button-up shirt Gabriel chose for the day. Strong enough to dress on his own. Hannibal could detect the scent of the soap from his bathroom. No longer any trace of the no-rinse solution used in hospitals that he despised. Alert enough to clean himself. Against his odds, Gabriel didn't need the use of a cane to come downstairs. All promising details that Hannibal noticed within seconds and he couldn't help nodding in approval at Gabriel's progress. “Sleeping late, uninterrupted, did a lot of good. Did you take your medicine?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Come with me.” He kept his pace slow for Gabriel's ease as he led him towards the opposite end of the castle.

“Should I bring Katinka?”

“She's fine for now.”

“I don't want Murasaki to think I'm dumping Katinka on her. What if she's busy?”

The thought of anyone making Murasaki do anything she didn't want, or that she would find caring for Katinka a nuisance, made Hannibal chuckle. He held the door to the dining room open for Gabriel to pass through before showing him into the kitchen. “Murasaki makes her own schedule. She would love nothing more than to spend the day spoiling the child. Sit here, please.” He pulled out Gabriel's chair for him at the breakfast nook.

As soon as he sat, Gabriel's attention was stolen by the view from the windows overlooking the dewy fields and the fog-shrouded forest beyond. Hannibal left Gabriel to his thoughts as he draped his jacket over the back of the chair across from him, before rolling his sleeves above his elbows. Hannibal had just taken the pan he needed from the rack above the stove when Gabriel turned his attention once more to him.

“What about the others?”

“Robertus is shut away in his office, where he will stay until probably this afternoon,” Hannibal explained as he began slicing tomatoes, spinach and mushrooms. The maitakes sizzled beautifully as soon as they hit the pan, filling the kitchen with a buttery, woodsy

fragrance. “I can't predict the whims of my sweet Mischa. Who knows what has captured her fancy today, or when she'll reappear?”

He was being studied as he cooked. His movements as he chopped and diced. The steps he could make blindfolded to the stove, refrigerator to counter and back. The control in his wrists as he sliced sausage before adding it to the pan. Curious eyes followed the way he didn't measure pinches of salt and herbs or splashes of milk before he whisked the eggs to scramble with the vegetables and spiced meat. Very rarely did he have an audience and the gaze was a warm weight that teased him to show off. And it was with great restraint that he brought two plates to the table, steaming and rich and only garnished with bright wedges of tomatoes. He would have time to showcase his culinary talents later.

“It's a little late for breakfast, but a nice protein scramble is just as good for brunch. Enjoy.”

Gabriel's appetite was much better this morning. It didn't take any cajoling to get him to pick up his fork. The sigh that escaped him when he tasted the first bite of creamy eggs had Hannibal pausing over his own plate to watch the rest of his reaction. Gabriel's next bite was sausage and fresh tomato. His eyes closed as he swallowed, savoring, and then he looked to Hannibal. “This is delicious. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Hannibal rose to make them some coffee. Just to be safe, he left Gabriel's black. A tea set was left on the table if he required sugar and cream. With his back turned, he indulged in the pleasure he felt. He allowed his smile to grow as he replayed Gabriel's enjoyment of his fare. The blood sausage had been finished off that morning. Hannibal instead used some of his own personal stock for their meal.

Mischa had been sweet and went to his house while he sat at the hospital. She cleaned before closing up, clearing his freezer and fridge and brought everything worth saving to the estate. He had thought of the sausage, the tourist he made it from, and decided before he finished his shower that he would serve it to their guest. The image of Gabriel licking the salty juices of it off his plump bottom lip brought a sense of satisfaction to Hannibal that was hard to place.

He returned to set a steaming cup beside Gabriel's half-finished plate. “What would you like to do today, Gabriel?”

His enjoyment and appetite faded at the question and Gabriel pushed his plate away after one last meager bite. “I don't want to impose, but is there a smart phone I could use? Or a computer? If no one is comfortable with me using theirs, I could go to a library or Internet cafe.”

“It's no trouble at all.” Hannibal prepared a scone with clotted cream and orange marmalade to share with Gabriel. He licked sticky sweetness off his thumb after he deposited half the scone, still warm from the oven, onto Gabriel's plate. “Tell me your preferred brand and model, and I will have them to you by this afternoon.”

“I can't ask you to buy new electronics for me, Hannibal. It's not right to expect more when you all have provided so much already.” Gabriel shook his head, the color and spirit he had

moments ago draining from him.

“I disagree. I don't need to remind you that you came here with nothing but the clothes you wore. Katinka is in the same way. Like you said: everything you had with you is gone. You are countries' away from home. It would be unspeakably discourteous of me if I did not help you achieve some sort of stability after all you've been through. And I imagine, as have you, that your life is moving on with or without you. It's important to establish contact with those worried about you.”

“Thank you. I'll pay back what I owe, once everything evens out.” A small smile teased at the corner of his mouth and Gabriel kept his eyes firmly on the cup of coffee in his hands.

“If you feel you must, we'll work something out.” Hannibal had no intention of allowing Gabriel to pay him back, but the idea of it won him the argument. He pushed Gabriel's plate close once again. “Now, finish your food.” They continued eating and planning the day while Hannibal refreshed their coffee.

* * * * *

Hannibal was upset, so he banished himself to the place he was most effective: the kitchen. It was going on close to three hours since he started preparations for supper and his frustration had yet to dissipate, his anger yet to cool. If he shredded meat harsher than usual, chopped vegetables without his usual finesse, no one was around to witness. There was no one to talk him out of opening a whole other bottle of Chianti for himself, either, after he poured a bottle of the rich red wine into the pot on the stove.

Aside from himself, Castle Lecter was empty. Robertus and Murasaki wouldn't be back until the evening meal, if not later. Mischa had once again coaxed Gabriel out of his room. To take him shopping. If it wasn't so important for Gabriel to get out and about, Hannibal would have teased his sister for her doting.

The last time Gabriel left the confines of the estate had been days ago. He only ever ventured outside to give Katinka fresh air and sunlight on their daily walks. Quiet, unobtrusive—hiding away in his room as he tinkered away on the computer Hannibal bought him. The only passion he had shown, searching for whatever connections from his life he could find. Gabriel's grief and depression were obvious. And as suspicious as Hannibal was, he could see it was all genuine. Even as Gabriel's body healed, his spirit remained damaged. If not for Katinka, Hannibal knew Gabriel would never attempt to get out of bed or function. A part of Gabriel died in the accident, remained buried under twisted metal and clutched tight in a dead man's embrace.

They all did their part in keeping Gabriel tethered to the world of the living.

Mischa had proven exceptional at it. Gabriel warmed to her instantly and Hannibal suspected that he too found it difficult to deny Mischa whatever she wanted. In return for humoring her and letting her show him around and letting her buy him anything that caught her fancy, Gabriel confided in her. He found solace in Mischa.

The first time she took Gabriel and Katinka out, Mischa returned to Hannibal, smiling even as she cried in his arms. Gabriel had gifted her with a glimpse of who Nigel became, after they went for a drive and talked over lunch at a quiet cafe. Mischa couldn't reconcile the Nigel Gabriel spoke fondly of to the brother she last saw when he was still in the last shrouds of boyhood. Gabriel happily relinquished precious tidbits and other details that were literally skin-deep. Apparently, Nigel never managed to give up his smoking habit and Hannibal saw for himself the tattoo Mischa gushed over.

Forever etched onto such sensitive skin, all in black ink, was the image of a woman. Hannibal didn't know if it was the portrait of a past lover or some kind of an ideal that his brother strove for. Nevertheless, the scantily clad woman on the left side of Nigel's neck was crude and vulgar, with the passing of time blurring what was once crisp lines and curves. Most likely something Nigel had done as soon as he was far from his family.

It was a part of Nigel's life Hannibal would never completely know and had no desire to. Hannibal could only now associate the tattoo with blood, a mangled form he knew like his own and waxy, ashen skin and refused to think on it further. Still, it was kind of Gabriel to give Mischa something of Nigel that wasn't spoiled by death.

Recalling the last time he saw Nigel reminded him of why he was upset most of the day. He had been on the phone again for hours. With the hospital. The police. Even with the head offices of the train company. Almost a month since the accident and no one had any answers for him. Why did this happen? When could he have his brother's remains? Why such secrecy and obtuseness? Unhelpful. Irritating. Deceitful. Hannibal remembered every name of every swine that wriggled out of their responsibility, pushed blame to someone else. Every charlatan who hung up on him. Each sniveling, lying pig who chose to protect something or someone that remained just out of sight. He would wait and make note, and at the best moment strike.

They were all just pieces of meat awaiting their place in his freezer.

Hannibal took a moment to calm his rising displeasure and swallowed a generous sip from his glass of wine. He set aside any thoughts of future hunting trips to focus once again on his current recipe. For now, most of his concerns were out of his hands, as much as he hated to admit it. He would have to trust that Lidija would come through for him where everyone else had proven to be disappointments.

He had just lifted the lid on the large pot on the stove, contemplating over whether on not he should start on the side dish, when Mischa came into the kitchen. She was unwrapping a scarf from around her neck, careful not to catch her wind-tangled hair in the soft folds. Her cheeks were pink. The scent of autumn chill and damp leaves followed her as she came to his side.

She gave him a quick hug and he kissed her forehead. “Hello, Mischa. Have you just returned?”

“We have.” Mischa smiled as she poured herself a glass of wine, humor growing even more as she noted how light the bottle was. “A day of sight-seeing and shopping. Katinka had fun. Gabriel took some persuading, but in the end he saw things my way.” She took a sip and

sighed as she looked into the swirling red liquid. “I do so enjoy buying lovely things for lovely people. It's probably my favorite hobby.”

Hannibal told himself not to lecture, to nag, but, “Are you sure that's wise? Spending so much on Gabriel?” Perhaps the wine had loosened his tongue.

“Like the amount you spent so Gabriel could have a computer? And a tablet? And a phone? And all the accessories you could think of for each?” She watched him over the rim of her glass.

Hannibal turned away from her, from the laughter he could see in her lovely eyes, to stir his pot. “It might be overwhelming, is all. Gabriel put up quite a fight before he accepted the computer, and everything else, even though they are essential parts of life. Especially, his life. He doesn't strike me as someone who is used to spending money on extravagant things, or has the desire to.”

“It makes me happy to hear those are your concerns.” She came to lean against the counter beside him. “I was afraid you objected to my spending money on a dish not long for this world.”

Hannibal chuckled at her choice of words and found her apprehension over Gabriel's well-being amusing. “I have no dinner plans for Gabriel. He is safe from me.”

“A status that can change from one moment to the next. Still, thank you.” She leaned up to kiss his cheek. “I like him.”

“Do you?”

Mischa hummed and sipped her wine. She would need to refresh her glass soon. “I think him very beautiful. Even beneath the cuts and bruises, the layer upon layer of sadness and fear that weighs him down. If we were to peel it all away, down to his heart, I think he would be like us. Like you.” She reached to play with a stray lock of his hair before tucking it behind his ear.

“You're a romantic.”

“So are you.”

“Gabriel is nothing like me.” To put an end to the discussion, Hannibal turned to her with his spoon. A sample for her to taste. “Pork ragù: with carrots, leeks, onions and jicama. Using the shoulder cut of a rather presumptuous boor, if I recall. Slow-cooked for three hours in a Chianti I am particularly fond of.”

Mischa took the delicate bite and smiled as she chewed. The meat should fall apart and burst with juices. Buttery and sweet, with a hint of smokiness from the wine. “Exquisite.”

Hannibal smiled, returning the lid and stepping over to start the other pot to boil. “We will be having it with a creamy Parmesan and Gruyère polenta.”

“How very rustic of you.”

“It's comforting,” he corrected. “Gabriel's stomach is still healing. He shouldn't have anything too harsh. The amount of calories in this will help him get back to the weight he needs to be and kickstart his body into healing faster.”

Mischa didn't say anything to that, for which he was grateful. She only gave him one more kiss before leaving him to finish, stealing the rest of the wine on her way.

Chapter End Notes

As I said, this chapter marks the beginning of the second arc. If you didn't notice, the last part was called The Brood Parasite. A brood parasite is a bird (or insect or fish) that becomes part of a different bird's nest to survive. Appropriate, I think. :) This one is called The Pitcher Plant. Pitcher plants are any kind of plant, that lures prey to it by it's (usually) attractive scent. This part focuses on Hannibal's on-going search for truth and his growing relationship to "Gabriel." Who's luring who? It's hard to say. ;)

I hope anyone who stopped by enjoyed this chapter. Please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers! See you next Thursday!

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! This chapter doesn't really have repeated dialogue from Mr. Lecter, but it does hint at and have a few references to things that were happening at the time in the story. If you didn't read the first part, I hope this is all not super confusing. At the same time, if you didn't read it or don't remember, I hope this all is turning into one big, coherent plot. :D It's making sense to me because I'm in it. If it's confusing or you have questions, feel free to drop me a line.

Right quick, I want to thank Jor_ishere, EmilyElm and Stralovat for not only returning each week, but for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments. You all are wonderful and I really appreciate you for letting me know you're out there and still enjoying this very niche story. :D

Hope everyone who reads this enjoys the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five

There was a crispness to the air that threatened snow, though none had fallen yet. The rain ceased for a few days. No sleet or frost to make steps and paths treacherous. By late morning, the sun chased the last of the unpleasant chill away. It tempted one to venture outside. Mother Nature beckoned those indoors to enjoy the last days of harvest before death settled over the land for several long, bitter months. Such thoughts pulled Hannibal from the agenda he had set for himself that day, to ignore sensibility for the sake of pleasure.

He was surprised to find himself far from being bored as his stay at Castle Lecter extended into a month. Aside from the responsibilities he saw to every day, he found his time taken by countless pursuits. He composed on the harpsichord. There were recipes he finally had time to test. His sketchbook was almost full, and he was nowhere near even a small fraction of the way finished working his way through his family's libraries.

And he had just put away the mounds of dough he made somewhere cool and dark to rise.

Would this be what retirement was like? He didn't plan to stay as such for long, but the peace and freedom to pursue whatever he wished was something he would enjoy. It was nice, having time and energy to spend with his family and dedicate to his hobbies. Even the idea of picking up his scalpel for recreation instead of occupation gave him a renewed sense of pleasure that had begun to wane in the last year, or so.

It was another beautiful day and all Hannibal could see was opportunity.

Which was what brought him to Gabriel's room. He was about to knock when he noticed the door was ajar and the sound of Katinka sobbing drifted through the gap. He let himself in without knocking and came to lean against the doorway to Katinka's room, absorbing every detail of the sight before him.

Katinka had worked herself up into a squalling mess. Fine eyelashes clumped together with her tears. Her face was flushed and her tiny hands balled into fists and curled into Gabriel's shirt. A particularly shrill cry broke off into a pitiful hiccup. Gabriel only cooed at her and patted a gentle hand along her back.

“I know. Tell me all about it,” Gabriel consoled as he paced back and forth.

Gabriel kissed her red cheeks, soothing away her tears. He buried his nose in the soft hair on the crown of her head. Their eyes met over the crying baby and Hannibal sensed it again. The sensation of seeing a glamour, of almost peeking past it. It was in Gabriel's guarded smile. The subtle shift of his stance. How small he tried to appear to Hannibal. Not much shorter than him, not so scrawny as he would like to appear, but Hannibal could feel the suggestion of it. Harmless. Demure. A false sense of security. Something to be overlooked and ignored.

Impossible for Hannibal to ignore.

The wounded wolf was welcoming, allowing a fellow predator into his den. This wasn't the first time Hannibal noticed. Gabriel wasn't afraid of him. Wary, but not frightened. Hannibal had a feeling Gabriel was perfectly aware that there was a hunter in his sanctuary, near his daughter, but wouldn't run. He wouldn't fight. Gabriel let Hannibal close and trusted him to not eviscerate him while he was so vulnerable. *How extraordinary.*

The moment passed and Gabriel pressed a tired smile into Katinka's hair. “*Someone* is in desperate need of her afternoon nap, but refuses to go to sleep.” A halfhearted whimper came from Katinka as if to argue his accusation.

“She seems to be calming down.”

"Don't let her fool you. It's her favorite trick: make you think she's sleeping and then scream in your ear and give you a heart attack." There was no bite to his words and he finished with a kiss to her nose. When he tried to put her in her crib and tuck her in, she whimpered again but was already falling asleep. Gabriel turned to him once more. “Were you looking for me?”

“Yes. I thought you might like to join me for a walk.”

* * * * *

The lands of the Lecter estate stretched for several miles in each direction. Some of it was used for crops. Orchards and vineyards. Several fields and pastures gave their livestock a place to run. Most of the land was wild forest. Acres and acres of woods, with bodies of water intersecting sporadically. Hundreds of paths and trails within, overgrown and maintained, to lose oneself in for hours.

It was colder once inside the treeline, but they would be fine with light coats. Hannibal led Gabriel along one of his favorite trails. It was one of the easier paths that wound through the trees for five miles, branching into other, more hazardous, routes. He didn't plan to walk too far, but it was a good beginning point. To his delight, Gabriel no longer walked with a limp and he seemed to relish the opportunity for such a hike.

“Robertus and Mischa mentioned a man coming up to the gates or approaching them while in the nearest town a few days ago,” Gabriel said into the comfortable quiet that had settled over them since they started out.

“Yes. An American. We assumed he was an acquaintance of yours. He seemed quite adamant to know of your well-being. Perhaps a concerned friend left behind in Romania come calling?”

Gabriel shook his head and gently pushed a young branch to the side to keep it from snapping as he walked by. “Everything I wanted to keep from Romania, I took with me. Relationships included. He hasn't been back?”

“Not that I'm aware of.”

“Good.”

A satisfied little grin curled along the edges of Gabriel's lips, hidden in the shade of the trees overhead. No one who meant anything to him, then, Hannibal was happy to note. Hannibal smiled as he watched him pause in his stride to pick up a pebble that caught his eye. His movements were slow, careful as he bent at the waist, but he wasn't in pain. “You look so much better, even in the short amount of time since you left the hospital. Superior meals, proper rest and no longer being just a name on a nurse's checklist has done wonders.”

Gabriel slipped the pebble into his pocket and smiled as he looked around them. “It's this place, I think.”

Hannibal followed his gaze, taken by the fields and pond in the distance but always returning to the dark of the forest. “I'll show you the other, more difficult, trails I favor, once you've completely healed.” Such simple delights were enough to make Gabriel happy. How did Nigel, his thrill-seeking and city-loving twin, cope with this wild being? “I can't imagine you at peace in Bucharest. In a bustling city that never slept.”

Gabriel chuckled and nodded. “I adapted. It took a while, but I eventually got used to it. I had to. Sometimes I missed where I came from before moving overseas and where I grew up.”

“And where were those places?”

“The first half of my life I spent all over the southern United States. A lot of it in Mississippi and Louisiana. And then I spent a few years up north in Virginia. I'm sure you guessed that I prefer isolation and quiet, but Bucharest served its purpose.”

“You said before you hadn't intended on returning to Bucharest, accident or no.”

Gabriel picked up a small feather as they walked further. He traced the edges of the gray down gently. It found it's way into his pocket, as well. “It wasn't good. Being there. It wasn't good for either of us.” Gabriel turned to him and stepped closer, sadness in his eyes as he begged for Hannibal to understand everything spoken and not. “Our relationship had been strained, for a long time. Something had to give, or we would have broke. Nigel thought a baby would change things, fix us somehow. But that could only be possible if we both were willing to work on it.”

“Did you work on it?”

“We were trying.” Gabriel's smile was a sad, trembling thing as he looked at the ground between them. “Both making allowances. I like to think we would have been happy, eventually.”

Hannibal looked Gabriel over, considered what he knew of Nigel and found a cold pressure settle in his gut. Gabriel was beautiful, but he possessed a savage beauty. A feral loveliness. Wild, untamed curls blew about his bruised face in the cool breeze. The scruff he had yet to shave off from his stay in the hospital was forming into a thick, plush beard. Since he went shopping for himself, Gabriel wandered the estate in boots and jeans. Flannels and thermals and soft Henleys covered corded, scarred muscle. He wasn't dainty. He wasn't fragile. Definitely not a glamorous trinket to hang off one's arm. An odd pang of discomfort clenched in Hannibal's chest at the thought. Realization quickly followed. Gabriel couldn't have made Nigel happy. Not forever.

* * * * *

Hannibal had always loved ritual and he practiced several. The act of cooking: gathering ingredients together and setting them up to create something not only pleasing to the senses but life-giving, as well. His own personal steps he took before entering the operating room, preparing for any possible outcome Fate deemed him and his patient worthy of. The sacred steps he took in stalking, hunting and slaughtering his latest quarry.

As the days went by, Hannibal incorporated his habits into the routines of Castle Lecter. He didn't often have to venture beyond the grounds. Not yet. Once he found more answers to his current mysteries he imagined he would be quite busy. Until then, he worked from the estate. If he was not busy hounding the hospital or scouring the Internet for anything he could find on Nigel and Gabriel, he saw to business around the estate that Robertus put off. Every morning, as the sun rose, he picked up his daily kendo exercises with Murasaki again. As if he had never left. He prepared all the meals for him and his family. All of Gabriel's continued care and physical therapy was his to oversee.

The evenings belonged to him and his whims. He mostly read or sketched as the hours ticked by. However, over the course of the past few nights, Hannibal noticed the beginnings of a new ritual.

In the evening, his family often gathered in the main sitting room. The cozy atmosphere lent the darkening nights a soft quality. Even Mischa lingered longer than usual. Murasaki insisted on keeping Katinka with her at this time. She enjoyed helping her eat, playing with her as Katinka grew drowsy and then she would put her to bed. Robertus and Gabriel took to

enjoying one another's company over a glass of brandy and chess. Their quiet discussions accompaniments to several wins on Robertus' side of the board and a few surprising draws on Gabriel's.

Through this all, Hannibal sat at the harpsichord and played. Now and again he made corrections or additions to the sheets of music propped before him. First, Mischa would take her leave for her cottage. Then, Murasaki would spirit Katinka away. Robertus and Gabriel played matches until Robertus' drink was finished and he followed after Murasaki. Finally, Gabriel joined him on the leather bench with an offered glass of whatever alcohol he fancied.

“May I join you?” Gabriel always asked permission before sitting.

Hannibal always made room for him, accepting the drink Gabriel held out to him. Whiskey this time. He watched as Gabriel looked over the music he'd written and scratched out, taking in the differences from when he last read the composition.

“You did an almost complete rewrite.”

“I wasn't happy with the overall melody.” He glanced at Gabriel's left hand that rested on the bench between them. His uninjured hand. While he kept his right hand bandaged still, it was slowly regaining its strength, the swelling reducing over the last few weeks. “Have you decided to collaborate with me, once again? I quite enjoyed your rendition of *Mary had a Little Lamb*.” Gabriel sighed, as if put upon so gravely, and lifted his left hand to fit over the harpsichord's keys. A hesitant, simplified version of *Ode to Joy* began clattering its way out of the instrument. Once again, Hannibal found himself utterly delighted by the attempt. He hummed in surprised pleasure. “You've evolved, I see. Onto more ambitious productions than Mary's poor lamb.”

Gabriel scoffed and pulled back, sipping his own generous glass of whiskey. Hannibal had lifted the no-alcohol ban on his care regimen and Gabriel quickly took advantage of his new freedom. “I'm still not going to pursue a career in music, no matter the instrument.”

“A shame.”

“Not at all.” Gabriel turned to watch his fingers glide unerringly across the keys and propped an elbow against the harpsichord. “You're talented enough for the both of us. I'll leave the playing to you.”

“Then have you given more thought to future occupation?” Hannibal frowned as he replayed the last measure. “I hope you are not thinking too deeply over such things. There is no time limit on your stay here, Gabriel. Focus on your health, on Katinka's, and let us take care of the rest.”

“I do enjoy being a stay-at-home dad.” Gabriel smiled into his drink. “Katinka's fits and tantrums are nothing compared to what's waiting for me out in the big, wide world. And if I'm running on just a few hours of sleep or none at all, I can always take a nap with her.”

It was said in a teasing way, but there was obvious truth in the words. Hannibal paused between scratching down new notes as he looked over Gabriel. Even in the dark, the

flickering glow of the fireplace, the circles beneath Gabriel's eyes were visible. It wasn't just bruising. It wasn't a hypothetical joke or a one-time occurrence Gabriel hinted at. Sometimes, Hannibal could hear him at night. Down the hall and in the warm, comforting confines of his own room, he could hear harsh gasps and sharp, startled cries. The symphony of night terrors. Bad dreams. Memories of horrible things replaying over and over. But at the start of a new day, they were all pushed down deep to be avoided.

“Are your nightmares increasing?”

If Gabriel was surprised by the question he didn't show it. He shook his head and grimaced. “I always have nightmares. This isn't anything I can't handle.”

“You suffer them often?”

“Since I was a boy.” His smile was meant to be reassuring but it only made Hannibal feel a wistful sort of sadness. “I happen to have a very good imagination, Hannibal, and the tendency to pick up emotions and let them cling to me until I'm buried under them. Nightmares are just the price I pay for my *gifts*,” he spat the word.

“Would you like me to do something for them?”

“Are you asking as my doctor?”

“No.”

Gabriel considered him, his words, for a moment before he shook his head. One of his untamable curls fell into his eyes. Hannibal thought nothing of pushing it off his forehead. Gabriel smiled, even as a liquid sheen gathered along his lashes. He rested his chin on his palm.

“Just keep playing.”

So Hannibal played, composing three new sheets before they went to bed. He bid Gabriel sweet dreams when they parted ways.

* * * * *

Since the accident, there was nothing that made Hannibal irritated faster than music that was played while he was put on hold. He never noticed before the grating tunes that many chose for their recordings. Like synthesized beats from commercials aired in the 1990's. To keep from breaking something, Hannibal stopped toying with his pen and started pacing around his office.

“Dr. Lecter? Sorry for the wait,” a tired, high-pitched voice cut through the music in a blast of static. “Dr. Balkus isn't in at the moment, but I was left a memo to tell you to contact Detective Las—”

“No.” Normally, Hannibal thought it appalling to interrupt others, but as he listened to what he realized was going to be more excuses, he felt the last threads of his control begin to snap.

“I will not. I spoke with Detective Lashikoff yesterday. She told me to speak with Dr. Balkus. Where is Dr. Balkus?”

“Working the emergency wards. It is still a mess at the hospital. We understand your frustration, and ask for your continued patience...”

Hannibal ignored the rest of what Balkus' assistant was saying. More excuses. More lies. He had been generous with these pigs from the beginning, but his patience had run out. Chance after chance he gave them. It was time to prepare for a hunting trip. A chime broke him of his thoughts and he looked at his phone screen. An email alert. Lidija would be ready to meet within the next week and he would be more than satisfied with what she found. Excellent.

“Of course,” Hannibal answered the appropriate reply into the lull of conversation. “I understand how hectic times like these can be. In any case, I'll set up a meeting with Dr. Balkus soon.”

He ended the call before he could hear more insincere promises and apologies. The thought of bringing Dr. Balkus to his dinner table did much for lightening his mood. Taking him wouldn't hinder Hannibal's quest to bring Nigel home. In fact, it might work in his favor more to be rid of such an obstacle. Someone else, someone hopefully more competent, would replace him. Hannibal considered the menu he was brainstorming for his upcoming party and smiled. Perhaps he would pay Detective Lashikoff a visit, as well.

His smile turned into something less sharp, fond, as he looked out the window and spotted his family on the grounds below. They took the leftovers from yesterday's lunch to turn into a picnic. Robertus and Murasaki lounged side by side, talking between nibbles of pâté and quick kisses. Mischa was in the middle of doing what she was good at, entertaining everyone around her with stories and, quite likely, random facts she flawlessly worked into conversation. It appeared they were victorious in their attempts at luring Gabriel into joining them.

Gabriel sat amongst them, Katinka content in his lap. He smiled and responded to whatever was said to him, but even from where he was, Hannibal could see he kept himself apart. Hannibal found himself once again fascinated by the man. The well-practiced habit he had of making himself small. The perfected image he projected to the world. The one that made Robertus want to protect him from any possible threat, even perhaps Hannibal. The one that brought even the cautious Lady Murasaki close. The one that thoroughly charmed Mischa. He couldn't tell if her regard was just Mischa's usual love of beautiful things, her pleasure in taking care of those who caught her attention or if she planned to seduce Gabriel.

The thought made him feel ill, angry and helpless all at once and he refused to entertain it any further.

Hannibal smiled as he watched Gabriel soothe Katinka as she began to fuss. At once nurturing as he was dangerous. Perhaps that was what fascinated Hannibal the most. He could see in the way Gabriel watched everyone and thing. Expecting threats and knowing how to deal with them, should they show themselves. In the way he carried himself, especially as he continued to heal. His once wasted form filling out again and muscle

developing once more. Not a stranger to physical work. Strength and control in every movement.

All hidden beneath layers of shyness, mourning and harmless frailty.

Gabriel made himself appear small and gentle, like a puppy one would want to play with and pet, forgetting he was a wolf that could rend and devour with a few snaps of a jagged maw. Hannibal sensed it time and again, as if catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror on his way by. And there was no greater a time that Hannibal saw that potential than when Gabriel was being soft.

On Gabriel's less limping walks with Murasaki. His evening games of chess with Robertus. The way he was ever mindful of Mischa, manners and protective nature present even beneath their familial teasing. The way Gabriel was with Katinka. His cub. His lost little pup. Protective and determined to provide for her, even as injured as he was.

Hannibal tore himself away from the scene his family made to join them. He could use an afternoon spent in their company. A balm to his irritated nerves. Another chance to observe Gabriel up close. All of that bottled up potential. What would it take to release it? Such a wondrous sight it would be to behold. It made him want to push that much more, to see what Gabriel would do. How he would react. Hannibal couldn't quite imagine it, but he was eager to bear witness to it.

* * * * *

Another day was winding down. A cold front blew in, bringing storms to batter Castle Lecter. Hannibal had always found that kind of violent weather beautiful and he paused to admire the lightning that raced over the forest before thunder rumbled against the windows. He turned back to his previous task with renewed vigor. Something hearty and warm was necessary on a day such as this. He had just finished setting out his ingredients when his solitude was encroached upon. Hannibal smiled when he looked up to find his intruder leaning quietly against the door frame, waiting for permission to enter.

“Hello, Gabriel.”

Gabriel returned his smile, always so oddly pleased at Hannibal's perpetual greeting. “Would you like some help?”

“I wouldn't turn you away, if you're offering.” He made room for Gabriel to stand beside him at the island counter.

Gabriel took in the ingredients: five mostly uniform cuts of meat with the bone still in the center, an assortment of spices, fruit and bottles of everything ranging from oil to a sweet-smelling juice. He cast a grateful look at the pile of tomatoes, carrots, onions and garlic—finally finding something he recognized. “What did you decide to feed us tonight?”

“Braised lamb shanks with vegetables in a pomegranate and Merlot sauce.” Before beginning, Hannibal poured them a glass of wine. “I already roasted the tomatoes. They should be cooled enough for you to peel them for the sauce. I'll start preparing the shanks.”

Gabriel took one last sip of wine before he washed his hands and set to work on whatever task Hannibal gave him. It was endearing, if also terribly amusing, how much Gabriel tried to be useful to them all now that he was feeling better. As if Gabriel being rested and no longer in a constant pained fugue was his cue to "earn his keep." It was such a charmingly American thing to be concerned with. Once finished with the tomatoes and mincing garlic, Gabriel started cutting the vegetables in the way Hannibal instructed.

"I haven't had lamb in a long time," Gabriel said as he watched Hannibal message oil and spices into the shanks.

"Then I'm happy to be the one to introduce it back into your diet. I work with this meat often. I find it quite versatile. In fact, I use this same meat for my cochlear gardens."

"Marinade and all?"

"Not this spicy. Usually, a blend of wine, mild herbs and oils are better suited." His last epicurean experiments involved a tart Zinfandel and the shank of an unlucky accountant. The snails preferred it over the last flavor combination. "Do you enjoy escargots?"

Gabriel shrugged as he finished the onions and reached for the carrots. "They're not bad. The last time I had them, they were covered in garlic butter. Anything tastes amazing drowned in melted butter and garlic."

"That is very true." Hannibal turned to heat oil in one of his largest Dutch ovens. When it was hot enough, he seared the shanks in batches. The meat browned beautifully, a nice crust forming on all sides. He glanced over his shoulder to find Gabriel watching him, all of the vegetables prepared and waiting. He removed the meat from the pot and came to stand once more beside his surprisingly adept assistant. "I noticed you were in the library earlier. You were worlds away, happy and relaxed with whatever captured your attention so completely. I didn't have the heart to interrupt you."

Gabriel's smile turned his face into something boyish and charming. He didn't attempt to tamp down on his enthusiasm as he sautéed the onions, garlic and carrots under Hannibal's guidance. "I found several copies of *The Divine Comedy*, including one in a language I could actually read. Robertus wanted to spend the day with Katinka. I might have took advantage of my free time."

"Time well-spent. Are you a fan of Dante's works?"

Gabriel nodded and let Hannibal take over the rest of the cooking. He sipped his wine as he watched. "It's an old, reliable favorite."

"It is one of mine, as well. How many others reread the Bible, my treatment of *The Divine Comedy* is much the same. I could not honestly say how many times I have read it."

"Me too. I've had the same copy since college. Any new thoughts I had about the text, things that really stuck out for me, I'd write in the margins and mark, underline." Gabriel's smile somewhat faded and he kept his eyes on the drops of wine left at the bottom of his glass. "I took that copy with me wherever I went. I had it on the train. It's a shame I lost it."

Hannibal left the pot to simmer and came to Gabriel, refilling his glass. “We will just have to find you another copy, worthy of replacement. You can fill the next one with new observations and theories.”

The cautious smile Gabriel gave him as he passed him his own glass warmed him like the blood-red wine never had.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say I hope this wasn't too terribly repetitious and boring and terrible. I feel like I'm not doing my best, but it might be because I've rewritten, reread and edited this story a lot so it all seems overdone to me. Or it could just be bad. That could be it. :P

There were a lot of scenes I took out or didn't bother putting in Mr. Lecter because they didn't fit in with Will's story or it just wasn't the focus of what I was getting at with Will. Hannibal has very different motivations right now, different things he's focusing on almost entirely. For Will, he had the business with the Verger's to attend to. For Hannibal, if it doesn't have to do with Nigel, his attention is on Will. Everything comes back to Will, and I hope I'm getting that across with his thoughts and new scenes.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! See you next week! Please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry this is so late in the day. I'm at a relative's house and their Internet is bonkers. Also, my allergies have kicked me into a sore throat, so I've felt terrible off and on. But I've had loads of honey and lemon and it's curbing my coughing. Here's hoping it just stays at soreness and doesn't develop into a sinus infection. :)

So, this chapter marks some important stuff. I hope everyone enjoys it. Super huge thanks to Jor_ishere, EmilyElm and Stralovat for taking the time to leave me such wonderful, thoughtful comments. It really brightens my day to see your messages.

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Six

Just because a few important matters were on hold, didn't mean his whole life was at a standstill. Time moved on, whether anyone wanted it to or not. Hannibal had put off and paused too much and now he needed to move forward. With or without finding the resolutions he hoped he would. It hurt to put Nigel aside but perhaps it was for the best. As Robertus said, it wouldn't do Hannibal any good to let his frustrations concerning his twin take over his life.

With that in mind, Hannibal prepared for his retirement again. It needed to be done and he focused on his objectives with renewed fervor. Almost everything had been taken care of. The process of leaving his old job already begun. His retirement would be official by the time he held a dinner party in celebration of such a milestone.

Months ago, plans for the event had been finalized. Menus were perfected and shopped for. Guest lists painstakingly created. Invitations sent out. All any of his colleagues, mentors and friends could talk about was their excitement for one of Hannibal's famous upcoming dinner parties. Unfortunately, it had been scheduled a few days after Nigel's death.

Everyone was understanding and sympathetic to Hannibal and his family when the party never took place.

But now, ideas were forming once more. With the little control he had, Hannibal insisted on putting a little order back into his chaotic world. New themes. A different atmosphere he wanted to create. A whole new menu. He had just the pigs in mind for the recipes he selected. Instead of hosting at his posh house in Vilnius, he would showcase his latest creations at Castle Lecter. His foundation. His roots. His stability.

This occasion was now also going to be used to unveil the treasures Nigel had to leave behind. Katinka's first time being exposed to the kind of life Hannibal reveled in living. Gabriel, wild and solitude-loving creature that he was, would join him because his family wished him to. Their introduction into the Lecters' world. That alone was enough for Hannibal to cement his plans.

This being the first of many nights with Katinka and Gabriel joining them, partaking in such a big part of his life, brought a smile to his face whenever he thought it. It made him eager for the future. The years ahead without Nigel not so bleak. He could see it clearly, the place he would make for Katinka and Gabriel in his world.

Gabriel was never far from Hannibal's mind. Their interactions. The bits and pieces Hannibal learned with each observation and conversation. He still couldn't quite figure him out. And beneath the pleasure Hannibal genuinely felt in being in the man's company, it was still never rid of him, the suspicion of an impostor in his home. Hannibal understood the threat for what it was, but he didn't feel threatened. Not personally.

Even knowing this, admitting the possibility to himself, he couldn't stop thinking of Gabriel. He felt powerless to do otherwise. Hannibal wished only to bring him comfort, knowing a hunted animal when he saw one. He closed his eyes and brought to mind the haunted shadows that often clung to Gabriel's harried frame. It was almost palpable, his need to rid Gabriel of the things he ran from. As Gabriel's only family, he intended to do nothing less.

“I'm sure you're granting your protection to him only because he was mine.” Hannibal glanced over his shoulder to find Nigel smirking at him from his chair by the fire. He chuckled when Hannibal didn't dignify his comment with any other response than turning back to the paperwork on his desk. “A touchy subject? Finally, there's something that gets under your skin. Perhaps that's not the only reason you keep Gabi close.”

Hannibal sighed and took his time capping his pen and returning documents to the drawer in his desk. There would be no more work getting done. Not until Nigel had his fill of Hannibal's attention. He turned to face his brother. “Whatever I think of him, I also want to help him. If I can. I need to bring his guard down for that.”

“Sure. Nothing more than comforting my angel in his time of need. Searching for lies with one hand while caressing him with the other.” Nigel scowled, clenching his fists against the leather armrests. “Sharing smiles and conversations over booze and piano in the firelight.”

“Harpsichord.”

“What-the-fuck-ever.” Nigel sat forward, the smile of a trickster growing the longer he looked him over. “I know you think my angel is beautiful.”

Hannibal didn't make it a habit to deny the obvious. He wouldn't start now, here. “I can see now why you always call him such.”

Nigel considered him, the humor slipping from his eyes. “Will you lure him to your bed before the oven?”

The unexpected question made Hannibal bristle. True, the tactic served him well before but now he found the idea of it horrid. “Gabriel's place is at the table, not on it.”

“For now.” Nigel bitterly reminded him of his suspicions, “You really think he would hurt me?”

Hannibal opened his eyes, banishing the image of Nigel looking so disappointed at him. “No.”

Nigel wasn't there to hear his soft admission.

* * * * *

Taking Gabriel and Katinka out was an experience Hannibal was finding oddly enjoyable. If it had been up to him, he never would have considered asking in the first place. Mischa learned he was going to run errands, finish the last details for his dinner party that was quickly approaching, and insisted he make room for them. He couldn't say he regretted his choice.

Katinka had barely fussed, easily gentled by either him or Gabriel the entire morning. She enjoyed taking rides in their cars, always so curious as the scenery passed. One of Mischa's main motivations for suggesting Gabriel accompany him was she knew Hannibal shopped at multiple markets, some in different cities. It was an opportunity for Gabriel to familiarize himself with even more areas. Hannibal took his eyes off the road to glance at his passenger.

Gabriel was much more coherent than the last time he had been in Hannibal's car. Now he sat silently beside him, reading road signs and making note of where he was, what exits and turn-offs they took. Clear, lucid blue eyes took in everything with as much enthusiasm as those of his daughter. It pleased Hannibal to see such progress in them both.

Hannibal pulled up to his latest, and last, destination and went around to free Katinka from her car seat. Gabriel took his time looking around, attention caught by the pier down below the shop they were parked in front of. There was a slight chill to the air but Hannibal attributed that more to them being near the sea than anything else. The day had been all together lovely. A pleasant morning turning into a golden autumn afternoon. He had just settled Katinka in his arms and pushed his sunglasses to the safety of the top of his head when Gabriel tore his gaze from the glittering horizon.

“Will you need my help carrying anything,” Gabriel asked.

“I shouldn't think so. Why? Are you beginning to hurt?”

“No, nothing like that. I thought I'd take a walk to the docks while you do your thing, if that's all right.”

Hannibal smiled at Gabriel's near impatience to get closer to the water. “Of course. The sea air and the short walk will be good for you.” Katinka began wriggling around in his hold as her own excitement at the seagulls overhead got the best of her. He rocked her, patting her bottom as she settled down.

Gabriel chuckled as Katinka lost interest in the birds to instead play with his tie. “Want me to relieve you of your squirmy burden?”

“Not at all. I've rather enjoyed carting her around today. Broadening her senses and future palate.”

“Escargot in her future, is it?” A teasing humor flashed in Gabriel's eyes.

Hannibal found himself smiling in return. “One can only hope. I shudder to think of what she'd consume without my influence.”

“With me in her life she has double cheeseburgers and Diet Cokes to look forward to. Balance out your snails.”

The thought was more disturbing than it had any right to be. Instead of wasting energy on responding to that, or Gabriel's newly blooming cheekiness, Hannibal turned to leave him to his own devices. “Go take your walk.” As he entered the shop, Gabriel's laughter drifted to him on the breeze. “*Diet Coke*.” Hannibal snarled at the thought and kissed a vow into Katinka's growing curls. “That will never happen, my darling.” Katinka only snuggled against the bright cobalt blue of his suit, resting her head on his shoulder.

The door's bell tinkled softly as he stepped over the threshold. Immediately, the aromas tickled his senses. Smoked meats. Dried herbs. Pungent cheeses. Fresh baked goods of every variety. Beneath it all, the tang of blood from the animals and fish in the back rooms awaiting preparation. At the sound of the entrance being disturbed, a face popped out from behind one of the shelves.

“Hannibal!”

He smiled at the elderly man and met him halfway across the floor with a friendly handshake. “Hello, Andre.”

“You're here for your seafood? I thought you would want it delivered.”

“Yes, my order is still set to arrive at the estate in a few days. I just came to browse your wares in person, find some finishing touches to perfect the evening.”

“Of course. Oh, my! Is this the little one? When we spoke on the phone, you said she was just a tiny thing.” Andre took up one of Katinka's hands to give a gentle squeeze. “It's good that she has you. You're seeing to them both, yeah? The baby and her papa? Nigel's young man?”

“I see you and Robertus have been gossiping,” Hannibal teased before conceding, “Yes, I am 'seeing to them.' I brought Gabriel with me today, in fact. I'll introduce you, once he's had his fill of the sea.”

Andre gave Hannibal's biceps a gentle squeeze. “You're a good boy.”

Hannibal chuckled and shook his head. “I haven't been either of those in a very long time.”

Andre just shooed him away to find what he was looking for. No matter the years he lived, his impressive list of credentials that kept growing or the accomplishments he made—Hannibal would always be a boy to Andre and his wife. Even Robertus didn't coddle him like the old Italian did. It was always a surreal thing, coming into Andre's presence. He was a family friend who wasn't aware of Hannibal's hobbies. Hannibal often wondered if it would change Andre's opinions of him. He glanced back and smirked, seeing Andre preparing him a basket to take back to Robertus. Probably not. Hannibal could walk in and set a severed head on his counter and the man would congratulate him on the clean cut.

As Hannibal browsed the shelves, he came to stand by the large windows overlooking the water that supplied Andre with part of his highly-prized stock. It wasn't hard to find Gabriel, relaxed and daydreaming as he stared into the frigid waves below the dock he rested on. What thoughts could be flowing through that head? His own musings were interrupted as he noticed a woman approaching Gabriel. All Hannibal could make out was a splash of garish red. Her features were concealed by the wide brim of her crimson hat. She was obviously targeting Gabriel, steps unfaltering as she neared the oblivious man. Curiosity too great to ignore, Hannibal hurried to the front.

“Andre.” The man came from the back rooms at the sound of his name. “Would you mind watching Katinka for a moment? I must see to my brother-in-law.”

“Is everything all right?” Andre took Katinka with the experience of a seasoned grandfather, already rocking her in arms before Hannibal took more than a few steps away.

“Yes, nothing to worry over. I'm using your back entrance,” Hannibal explained as he was already on his way out.

The back of the shop opened to a lift and a flight of stairs that led directly to the docks for ease of deliveries. Keeping low and quiet, he could see Gabriel and the mystery woman but they didn't notice him. The crashing of the surf muffled any sound he made. He was too far away to hear her greeting when she finally came to Gabriel's side. He didn't startle but it was clear even from a distance that he did not wish to be talking with her. The closer Hannibal came, the more he could make out. Their voices finally drifting to him higher than the wind and waves.

Another American. She was familiar with Gabriel, though from his tone she wasn't someone he was very fond of.

“You're a hunter then, Miss Lounds?” Never had he heard Gabriel sound so detached, cold. It quickened Hannibal's pulse, made his blood rush feverishly through his veins.

“In a way, you could say I am. This is the first time I've put my skills to this kind of search, though.”

“If you have a point, make it. Otherwise, I need to cut this short.”

Hannibal tucked himself closer to the wall of crates he stood behind as Gabriel took a step in his direction in an attempt to leave this Ms. Lounds' company. Her next words froze Gabriel in place.

“Are the Lecters aware that they took in a wanted criminal, or did you feed them some sob story?” A smile stretched slow across her glossy lips and she laughed at whatever Gabriel's reaction was. The sound confident and cruel. She was entirely at ease, unafraid of the wolf she thought muzzled. “They have no idea do they, Mr. Graham? No clue that an unstable, former FBI agent has infiltrated their gilded nest. How did you manage that? I'm not here in any official capacity, by no means, but I still would love to hear all about your rise from seemingly out of nowhere to what looks like the guardian of the late, dashing Nigel Lecter's sole surviving daughter. Triumph out of tragedy. People love that stuff.”

“Why are you here, Miss Lounds? I doubt very much an American tabloid would care enough about my possible existence to send you all the way here on their dime.”

“As it happens, someone else is footing my bill. Mason Verger pays very well and is willing to cover whatever costs I have when I show him such promising results.”

“Did you tell him where I was? A lot of innocent people died.”

“I'm not the only one who knew you were in Romania, *Aiden*. In fact, considering what happened, you're lucky I'm the one who found you here.”

“And how'd you manage that?”

“It would have taken me a while, possibly without ever getting a lead, but there was a guy raising all sorts of hell at the hospital where survivors of the crash were taken. He knew one of the possible victims. I told him I was looking into the missing, he gave me more information to fit together. Boom. Here you are.”

“What do you want?”

“I told you: my motivations changed. Now, when I found a bounty on you while searching down other leads, I thought I hit something big. I mean, you happened to sleep your way into one of the most influential, richest, most dangerous dynasties in the states, are responsible for the disappearance of Margot Verger and brutally attacked her brother before fleeing the country. What was worth more than the story than what Mason will pay for you?”

“Imagine. Never having to write another shitty fluff piece ever again. You'd be set for life, Freddie.”

“My thoughts exactly. Except now, you once again attached yourself to money and power. I'm impressed, Will.”

“Must be my good looks.”

Hannibal made himself turn away. He would have given someone's right arm for more time, but it wouldn't do to be greedy. The walk back up to Andre's shop took but a moment. By the time he gathered Katinka back into his arms, Gabriel was making his way up the winding path he followed earlier to the docks. There was a haunted, exhausted look to him that he couldn't quite conceal. The vibrancy he had before dimmed to almost nothing. However, when he heard Katinka laughing as she watched the seagulls and found them waiting for him,

Gabriel perked up. They met at the top of the path. To Hannibal's amusement, Katinka leaned out of his hold trying to get Gabriel's attention. He passed her to him without a moment's hesitation.

Hannibal took him in: the way he kissed Katinka and rubbed his cheek against hers. The sweet smile that timidly curled his lips when he noticed Hannibal's study of him.

“Get everything you need,” Gabriel asked.

“Yes, thank you. This day was entirely more fruitful than I thought to expect.” Hannibal came to place a hand at the small of his back, guiding him to the shop. “A dear friend insisted on my making introductions, and then I believe I promised you lunch.”

Hannibal made small talk. He smiled and assumed the charming persona he perfected over the years. Plans for dinner were made for the future. Honestly, he couldn't recall a thing of what was spoken. Inside he was thrumming. He felt so many things. Too many things. Elation. Vindication. A voracious curiosity he could hardly contain. A curiosity he could not slake. Not yet. There would be time for that later.

Meanwhile, he carried on as if nothing extraordinary had happened. There was so much he needed to do. So much he ached to know. New pieces on the board that begged to be put in play. He recalled what he learned over and over, committing every word of the clandestine meeting to memory. Every priceless detail. Hannibal smiled as he drove them to a restaurant that met his standards with the most valuable fact echoing through his head. *Will. His name is Will.*

* * * * *

It wasn't difficult, continuing on with the charade Gabriel—Will—created. In fact, now that some of the pieces to the puzzle Hannibal had been agonizing over were revealed, he was rather enjoying himself. Of course, none of what he found out could be verified until later. His only source—Freddie Lounds, if memory served—didn't seem the most reliable. For now, all he had to do was keep an eye on Will and the people who were circling him closer than Hannibal cared for.

Connecting what he overheard with what he knew was an interesting challenge he entertained himself with as they waited for their lunch to arrive. Some of it made perfect sense now. The way Will carried himself, his intuitiveness. It now seemed obvious he would have a background in law enforcement. Adaptive. Calculating. Shrewd. Hannibal admired him more for the guise he managed to keep these long, painful weeks.

Other details didn't fit as well. Ms. Lounds returned often, for such a short exchange, to the idea that Will was a black widow, of sorts. Attaching himself to money and power, only to leave destruction and death in his wake. Compelling, but it sounded like a story to sell more papers than anything else. Will didn't deny it. The clever boy didn't ever really confirm nor deny any of what Hannibal overheard. A germ of truth would be found in most of what the journalist accused him of. It was up to everyone else to decipher the truth.

However, sitting here with Hannibal at one of Lithuania's finest restaurants, Will was obviously uncomfortable. He didn't touch anything he didn't have to. When the waiter first came to settle them, he politely asked for mineral water. Hannibal ordered his meal for him as he seemed at a loss of what to try, especially after he glimpsed the absence of pricing on the menu. Hannibal hid his smile in his glass of Nebbiolo rosé.

For a greedy homme fatale, Will's reaction to the entire ordeal was somewhat lackluster to what had been hinted at in his and Ms. Lounds' heated exchange. It wasn't an act, some coy display with an underlying hunger for the finery Hannibal could easily provide him. The only thing Will insisted on was that Katinka be accepted in such an establishment. For the rest of their wait, Will focused solely on Katinka. She grounded him, soothed his nerves as much as he did hers. The warm opulence surrounding them was completely ignored for the sake of eagerly giving his attention to the baby.

Finally, Will settled enough to no longer ignore Hannibal. “Andre seemed nice. Like a pushy little Italian grandpa.”

Hannibal chuckled and nodded in agreement. “Yes. I don't think he's ever met a person he didn't immediately want to take care of.”

“How do you know him? You seem like long-time friends.”

“For most of my life. After my uncle took us in, Andre reached out to him. He was once a dear friend of my parents, my mother, before time and location faded their bonds.” When there was no reply forthcoming, Hannibal couldn't help pushing. “Nigel, of course, wouldn't have thought to mention him. It appears he spoke rarely of his family and friends from home.”

Will toyed with the stem of his glass, not to stall but consider what he was about to say. “Most of what he did, who he was around, was just business. His family, Katinka—that's who he kept close.”

“Seems a small circle for someone with a high-profile career.”

“Don't get me wrong.” Will chuckled and picked up Katinka's lamb she tossed on the floor. “Nigel loved the wealth, the power, the image he had painstakingly created for the public to see. There wasn't anyone equally as powerful in Bucharest that he didn't know, didn't have some sort of business with. But that was for the public. He was different with his family.”

“He only had to move to another country to settle down.” It still stung to know Nigel was happiest away from him.

“Maybe he just had to prove he could do it all himself. If he stayed, would you have let him do everything on his own? Would Robertus?” Will's smile told him he already knew the answer, even if Hannibal attempted to protest the implication. “He told me how close you are to your family. Nigel assumed you would all still be living together, you and Mischa not yet able to 'cut the cord,' as he put it.”

It wasn't said unkindly and it sounded like something Nigel would say. Even so, the statement felt like an accusation from beyond the grave. His brother always fought their connection, to Hannibal and everyone else. When they were boys, he dreamed of being away—free to roam where he wished. Hannibal enjoyed his own life filled with few attachments but he always returned to his family. There was nothing more important to him than that.

Hannibal found himself fidgeting with his silverware and napkin. He reached over to straighten the ruffles of Katinka's skirt. Finally, he thought of a way to reply. “I have always been the one to take care of my family. I like to.”

“Keeping things in order. Taking on every responsibility they let you. Making sure we're well-fed and cared for,” Will supplied.

“Just so. It has always been my job, and I enjoy it. When Nigel left, I worked that much harder to ease my family's heartache, to reconcile with Nigel.”

Will looked as if he wanted to ask about the circumstances that broke them all apart. Instead, their food arrived and he forced his unquenchable curiosity down to enjoy less heavy conversation. Hannibal almost wished he would have asked, regardless of the setting they were in. He couldn't imagine Nigel telling “Gabriel” anything that had to do with that dark chapter of their life. Nigel kept so much from Will. They both seemed to have kept many things from each other. What was one more shameful secret amongst them?

It was in that moment, behind the pleasantries of sharing a meal between just the pair of them and listening to Katinka gurgle and giggle at their attention, Hannibal realized he wanted to tell Will. He wanted him to know everything. Hannibal didn't want to hold back any details and was willing to live with whatever consequences followed.

* * * * *

It was late when Hannibal found the time to corner his uncle. The day had been filled with one excitement after another. Though he was in better health than weeks prior, Will was exhausted by the time they returned. He and Katinka both. Then again, Hannibal worked very hard to tire him out. Aside from going to the five places Hannibal shopped at and the restaurant, he drove his charges around a few more sights he thought Will would enjoy. Quiet, secluded, picturesque pockets of natural beauty. It took them longer to get home and Will was practically nodding off at the dinner table.

After supper, Will and Katinka went straight upstairs to bed. Dead to the world and didn't hear the sounds of Hannibal gathering what he needed for a late-night visit to Druskininkai.

Mischa and Murasaki had already left for their flight to Japan. Just a small trip over a few days as Mischa showed her work in a Tokyo gallery. They would be back in time for Hannibal's dinner party. Only Robertus remained at the estate and Hannibal knocked on his study door before slipping inside.

Robertus smiled as he joined him for a brandy. “Did you enjoy yourself today? You've seemed quite jubilant ever since you returned.”

Hannibal couldn't stop from smiling at his uncle's observation and actually laughed at the shock on Robertus' face at his open display of mirth. “Yes, I very much enjoyed myself today. To think, this time last night I was driving myself mad trying to see what I was missing and now...” Hannibal finished his drink, savored the sweet burn that slid down his throat to pool like warm embers in his belly. He set his glass down and smiled again. “I was right.”

“You often are. What about this time?”

“That man sleeping down the hall from me, who knew Nigel in ways I never did and cares for my niece like she's his own, is not a Lecter. His name isn't even Gabriel.”

“What?” Hannibal leaned close and grabbed his arms to keep Robertus from rising. Robertus forced himself to lower his voice and gave a light swat to his nephew's knee. “You're so naughty, sitting on this the entire day before coming to me in the middle of the night, all smiles like it's Christmas morning.”

Another laugh escaped him and Hannibal had to force himself to keep quiet. “I couldn't find the right time.”

“That time is now. What happened today? Who is he? Did Lidija contact you?”

“No, I should be meeting with Lidija soon. It was more a case of divine intervention.” Hannibal settled back into his chair with a sigh. “The universe deemed me worthy enough to set me on the path I needed to be at just the right time. Gabriel's real name is Will Graham. And whoever Will is, he is sought by many people. One of them found him today. She must have been stalking him, us, for quite some time. As soon as he was alone, she approached him.”

“Who is this woman?”

Hannibal smiled at the frown clouding his uncle's features. Robertus didn't like the idea of someone circling his family, the young man he was growing so fond of. “An American tabloid journalist. She seemed to know quite a lot about Will's situation. I would love to meet her.”

“What has Will done to garner such attention?”

“A lot, from the sounds of it. Perhaps a disgraced FBI agent. Wanted for assault, possible murder and there's a bounty for him. All of this *before* he met Nigel.”

Robertus was silent for a moment before he finished his drink and grabbed the decanter to pour another. “Our Will doesn't do anything by half measures, I see.”

“No, he doesn't.”

“You are in an excellent humor for discovering such deceit.”

“Why wouldn't I be?” Even now he hadn't quite succeeded in stopping from grinning. “I feel absolutely vindicated. For weeks I thought I was being irrational, obsessing over something that wasn't there. Hearing wolves at my door where there weren't any. But there was one, this

whole time, sleeping with his pup at the foot of my bed." Hannibal stood and Robertus joined him as they wandered to the door. "You can tell the others, but let Will keep his disguise. For now."

Robertus considered this new information, mulling it over as he sipped his brandy. "What do you intend to do?"

"I intend to watch Will unfurl his long-cultivated design. It sounds like he's been running for a while. Hiding. Before he met Nigel and after. I want to see it, where this is all leading. Let's let him think he's still concealed in the tall grass."

Robertus chuckled and patted Hannibal's cheek. "Wicked boy. I am still leaving this all in your capable hands. We'll play our games as he plays his. I only ask that, should any of my wishes be considered, you not be too cruel to Will. We don't know everything and one can't trust the word of a tabloid journalist overly much, especially one who hasn't come to us with the possibly life-saving information she has."

"You have my word, I will not show our guest any form of discourtesy. Though, I cannot promise I won't kill Will if I find he harmed Nigel."

"I understand." Robertus walked with Hannibal to the ground floor, taking one of his suitcases out to the car for him. He hugged his nephew goodbye and before Hannibal got into his car to go on one of his hunting trips, he assured him, "If we find that Will betrayed our Nigel, in any way, I will help you go grocery shopping myself."

Chapter End Notes

So now you all know what happened on Hannibal's end in Mr. Lecter when Freddie cornered Will that first time. :D I hope you liked it. I had envisioned this happening when I wrote Mr. Lecter. I think a lot of the time, Hannibal just happens to be in the right place at the right time. He always takes advantage when he's given the upper hand and this would be no different.

I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter. Please stay safe, sane and healthy! See you next Thursday!

~CReed

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! This is a pretty long chapter. Nearly 10k words, if not slightly less than that. I didn't want to break it into two parts. Everything is pretty much connected and I hate breaking one complete thought down to smaller bits just for the sake of length. I have been accused of writing my chapters in an episodic style. I can't help it. It feels wrong if I create a pause before there should be. :)

Something happens in this chapter and I just want to remind anyone reading not to worry. I got you. Trust me, your friendly writer. :) Before I get to it, I want to thank Jor_ishere and Stralovat for taking the time to leave me such lovely, thoughtful comments. I really appreciate it. It makes me so happy to see this story is being enjoyed.

Hope anyone passing by likes this next installment. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seven

Hannibal's day was a non-stop flurry of activity. He should have been exhausted. Time had taken the vivacious young man he once was. Often his juggling act of a full social life, career as a prominent surgeon and countless hobbies, both unorthodox and otherwise, reminded him of the fact that he was rounding the middle of his forties. To be sure, he had his occasional aches and pains, a pull in a random muscle that had never bothered him before, but Hannibal took care of himself and knew retirement from his habits was a long way off. If ever.

A night drive to Druskininkai turned into hunting by the sliver of moonlight overhead. Two prey in one trip. He did tell Dr. Balkus' assistant that he would arrange a meeting soon. Hannibal usually preferred to stalk his quarry for a longer time, set up a trap such as car trouble along a lonely stretch of road or a random encounter at an event far from either of their homes, but it never hurt to improvise when necessary. It was always good to test his skills and never grow too comfortable in routine.

Hannibal ambushed Dr. Balkus after he entered his garage. Detective Lashikoff practically wandered into his slaughter room with a few sweet words and charming smiles. Not the most original tactic, but it was tried and true for a reason. They both fit easily in the back of his Lexus. Once in the privacy of one of his properties on the outskirts of the city, it took no time at all to string them up for preparation. He was hardly winded.

He should have been exhausted, but the events of the day left him exhilarated.

While he waited for them to drain, Hannibal settled for the remainder of the night. Morning. There were only a few hours of darkness left before the sun would break over the horizon. It

would be a waste of time to try for an hour or two of sleep. Sleep was the least of his priorities. With a fully stocked coffee tray, he took out his laptop to finally let himself indulge in what he put off for hours.

It wasn't hard to find information on Freddie Lounds.

Immediately, his search brought him to *Tattle Crime*. An American website that presented itself as news but was definitely of the tabloid genre. “News” in the loosest sense. Editorial and opinion pieces masquerading as truth. The writers contributing to the site seemed more concerned with posting uncensored crime scene photos than they were with reporting.

Currently, most headlines were dedicated to an on-going investigation involving the abduction of several young women in the northern states. Interesting, but not what he was looking for. Whatever she was involved in now, it didn't leave Ms. Lounds time to upload content. A story with her byline had not been uploaded in almost a year.

Ms. Lounds' command of the English language wasn't her strength as a writer. Bold Headlines, implications and claims so sensational they couldn't be true but were supplemented with photos of crime scenes and people she shouldn't have access to that made her stories oddly compelling—that was the area she excelled. A lot of her articles, accusations dressed up as facts from reputable sources, shocked and enticed. True crime buffs, conspiracy theorists and active serial killers were most likely her largest demographic. Entertaining and informative in their own way. Leaks and tip-offs authorities despised. A treasure trove of gossip and speculation for those not wanting the polished and censored news from network television and papers.

A shame there wasn't a site similar in Lithuania.

What Ms. Lounds was “reporting” on right before her hiatus heated Hannibal's blood and made something soft and tender flutter in his rib cage. A garish headline and purple prose painted a story of greed, sex and gruesome violence. A sordid tale fit for Hollywood films. The more he read, the wider Hannibal's smile grew.

...The daughter of wealthy business tycoon Molson Verger, Margot Verger, met Will Graham sometime in the spring of 2013. No one knows what Special Agent Graham was doing in that region of Virginia at that time and his former employers will not answer any questions I, nor the Verger family, have.

After that fateful meeting, a steamy love affair began between the heiress and the agent. It would prove to be a scandalous and dangerous union. The beauty had no idea of what beast she invited into her bed. Blinded by love, Verger was unaware of Graham's interest in her family. Her deep pockets and powerful connections were Graham's main goal, and he used his good looks and chameleon-like charms to fool Ms. Verger into believing he was everything she wanted.

Mason Verger, a devout Christian and ever protective of his twin sister's virtue, told me he became concerned for Margot and his family. They were always close, but after she met Graham, Margot stayed away from her family for longer and longer periods of time. After a

while, he barely saw her. When he tried to talk to her, bring up his concerns, Margot would get defensive and they always ended things in a terrible argument.

Then, one chilly April morning, terror struck the Verger household. A large sum of money was transferred from the Verger accounts with no trail of where it was invested. Deeply concerned for his sister, Mason confronted Graham. The FBI's finest brutally attacked Mason, left him for dead and killed several of Mason's personal staff before fleeing the scene. It is suspected that Graham abducted Margot after the bloodbath at Muskrat Farms, the Vergers once idyllic ranch. To this day, no one has seen Will Graham or Margot Verger.

After the attack, it has come to the attention of Tattle Crime *that Will Graham had a history of mental instability. After working for only a short time in the Behavioral Science department, Graham took time off work before returning. This time, to White Collar Crimes. Sources say he took leave after a psychiatric breakdown from working cases involving serial killers. How did such a disturbed individual manage to keep a job at such an esteemed facility?*

When asked, the FBI refused to comment, circling their wagons close and promising the public, and what remains of the shaken Verger family, that Will Graham's apprehension is their top priority. There is speculation, however, that the FBI know exactly where this deranged agent is and are protecting him, covering up the murder of one of America's most glamorous heiresses...

Hannibal read all he could find. Ms. Lounds contributed more stories on the case than any other writer. Every piece plastered with professional-quality photos of who Hannibal could only assume was Margot Verger. A once cherubic kind of beauty, sharpened over the years to conceal any vulnerability behind expensive makeup and even more expensive clothing. Armor to protect herself. Her soft green eyes held such fear. And anger. Hannibal likened her to a gentle animal that had been mishandled so often that it wouldn't be long before it lashed out.

And there was Will. Staring at him from the pages of a cheap, sensationalist website. Hannibal couldn't imagine he was a fan of social media platforms and smiled at the photos Ms. Lounds was forced to work with. One was years' old. A work ID. From the glimpse of what appeared to be a uniform, Hannibal guessed law enforcement. Scruffy, thick facial hair to disguise such a youthful face. The eyes, however. Even with such grainy resolution, Will's eyes held the heavy knowledge of many lifetimes. They belonged to a weathered, haunted old man, not this charmingly lovely boy. The other photo was most likely clipped from another ID. Older, more weary. Still hiding behind scruff and messy curls. And dark-framed glasses. His own form of armor.

Unfortunately, there was very little else to glean from the site. Every article was more of the same with just a few differing details to add in each. A small fraction of facts while the bulk of the stories were garbage to entertain housewives while they waited for their laundry to dry. But then, Ms. Lounds' updates stopped. No explanation on where she went or if it was work-related. Interest in Margot Verger died down without her constant poking. Soon, she was side-lined in favor of more current, gruesomely dispatched victims.

After exhausting *Tattle Crime*, Hannibal found everything he could on Will Graham. Sadly, there wasn't much. Nothing near enough to satisfy Hannibal's curiosity, his need to know everything he could about Special Agent Will Graham.

A police report had officially been filed. Murder. Theft. Abduction. Assault. Attempted murder. From what Hannibal could deduce from the vague accounts was Will killed Mason Verger's personal bodyguards. The assault and attempted murder charges were for Mason Verger. Whatever Will did to him, it left him with severe injuries to his face and body. There were no photos available, but Hannibal could guess the damage Will did. It would be brutal, horrifying. Beautiful in it's savagery. From another more reputable site, there was mention of maiming.

Hannibal ached to know, to see, to ask. One day, Will would tell him. Hannibal would show Will he was safe. His secrets would be protected by him. Did Nigel know? Could his twin sense the danger emanating from the man he entrusted with Katinka? Was it the reason Nigel chose him? Did Will confess all of his secrets to him eventually?

That was one of many things Hannibal had yet to understand. The timeline was too tangled to see clearly. Will had told them he met Nigel four years ago. An obvious lie. According to police reports, and mostly tacky reporting, Will had left the United States less than a year ago. In that time, he had established a life in Bucharest. He met Nigel along the way. That would mean Nigel had already conceived a child before Will came into his orbit. Was Nigel with someone, a prior commitment, who he tossed aside for Will?

Had Nigel been enamored so quickly? Love at first sight? How fast he must have welcomed Will into his life. Had he involved Will in the remaining wait for Katinka? Hannibal tried to think of Nigel and Will's anticipation for a baby and it wasn't difficult to do. The love Will felt for Katinka was real, visceral. For all his deception, Hannibal could see their bond wasn't forced.

Hannibal knew that there should be a part of him that worried over this new knowledge. He had, essentially, been proven right. Will lied to him. And they weren't small, harmless lies. There was danger and death and chaos in Will's past. Then again, therein lay all the reasons Hannibal wasn't moved to ready a place for Will on one of his empty foundry hooks. Not yet, anyway. Experience told him to wait a little longer, let his targets come closer. To see what they would do.

There was still something Hannibal was missing.

At a dead end for the time being, Hannibal turned his attention towards his largest obstacle. Ms. Lounds mentioned a bounty that afternoon. It wasn't difficult to guess who put it on Will's head. Because of her knowledge of it in the first place, and the fact that she hadn't been working for *Tattle Crime* in some time, it was safe to assume Ms. Lounds was planning to collect. There was only one person who would be invested enough in Will's capture to pay for Ms. Lounds' expenses with a promise for more if she managed to deliver the lost little American.

After a few more hours of searching, a plate of croissants and an entire pot of coffee, Hannibal finally came across a website asking for any information on the whereabouts of

Will Graham. There was mention of a reward, a meager sum that was obvious in it's job as a front for what Mason Verger was actually fishing for. The real sum would only be discussed once contact was made. Whoever was in charge of the site had been very careful to not incriminate themselves. The kind of transaction Mason wanted would have to be conducted under the table, face to face.

Hannibal was tempted to call the number provided, but managed to control his growing curiosity. He would have to check back now and again.

As Hannibal began rearranging his plans with this new information in mind, he pulled out his phone to make a call. It was early, but he should already be up and starting his day. The call picked up after only a few rings. “Hello, Vidas.”

“Good morning, Hannibal. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call? Lidija is still in Romania, as I am sure you already know.”

Hannibal smiled at Vidas' familiar tone. The smooth tenor never became ruffled or raised, never an inflection to betray his feelings. Many found him cold, clinical. Hannibal always felt calm in his presence. “Yes. I had something else I wanted to discuss. Another matter I need tended to.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“I certainly hope so. It has been brought to my attention that Nigel had a friend in Romania. He was on the train, as well. His name was Aiden. I'm not sure of the spelling or the last name. I realize how little I am giving you to work with, and I apologize.”

Vidas hummed over the line, considering. The clacking of keys rose up in the background noise. “It will really just come down to a process of elimination.”

“Do you think it's enough?”

“To find someone? Of course. Though there is little information, it is a relatively small pool to search. I will work on this when Lidija does not have me running other errands or working other jobs. This should not take long.”

“Thank you, Vidas. I won't keep you any longer from your morning routine.”

“You are welcome, Hannibal.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Do not ever hesitate calling me, should you need my help.”

The call ended as abruptly as it started and Hannibal smiled at the progress he had already made in the day. Another item on his agenda that was on it's way to being taken care of. Hannibal put his phone away and began clearing the remains of his breakfast. There was still so much to be done, that he was eager to see to. But it would all have to wait a little longer.

For now, Hannibal had meat to butcher and his family to return to.

* * * * *

When Hannibal returned, the estate was noticeably quieter. The day did not bring storms but still managed to shroud his boyhood home in its overcast shadows, made darker by the empty rooms that met him. He found Robertus on the second floor, rocking Katinka as she played with her floppy blue bunny. Hannibal took a few moments to enjoy the sight of his uncle doting on the child before he made his presence known.

“Good afternoon, Robertus.”

“Hannibal. How went your hunting trip?”

“Fruitful on all fronts. Where is Will?”

“Most likely outside, if you didn't see him on your way up. My guess would be around the paddock. He walks there often, now that his leg hardly gives him trouble. He needed some time to himself.”

“Oh?” Hannibal looked over his uncle—his gentle, secret smile as he thought of Will and the relaxed line of his body as he leaned back in the rocking chair. A satisfied cat, if ever Hannibal had seen one. “And what kind of hunt did you enjoy, while I was away?”

Robertus chuckled and tickled Katinka's sides. “Nothing as strenuous as yours.” His smile grew into something fond as he looked to Hannibal. “I drew up paperwork and presented them to Gabriel today. Gabriel Lecter is officially a part of our family, with all the responsibilities and privileges that come with the name. Access to our fortune, tied to our legacy.”

“And how did he take that?”

“Oh, not well at all. He tried to tell me 'no.'” They shared a laugh at that, Hannibal understanding how in vain such an action was. “The poor boy nearly had a panic attack.”

“Really?” As intriguing as Will's response was, Hannibal couldn't stop the alarm tickling along his spine.

Robertus hummed in affirmation and straightened Katinka's collar. “He said it wasn't right, expecting any further kindness from us, let alone accepting such a thing. Even so, he left my office with new identification, passport, credit cards and checks—we shall see what our Will does with such opportunity.”

Hannibal knelt for a moment to run his fingers through Katinka's fine hair and kiss her hand. He stood and gave Robertus' shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I am going to go look for him.”

“See you at dinner.”

Robertus' fondness trailed after him as he stepped into the hall and made for the stairs. Capricious old man. It was never a wonder how Robertus could accept and encourage the spells of whimsy that sometimes came over Hannibal. His uncle was prone to flights of fancy in much the same way. Hannibal wasn't upset over Robertus' decision. In fact, he almost envied his uncle for the stroke of genius.

Wealth and power had strange effects on people. If this was Will's desired outcome for all this, they would soon know.

Hannibal found Will right where Robertus told him he would. Across from the castle, beyond a large pond and an orchard, was the paddock. Their small flock of sheep and goats grazed in the nearby fields. Hannibal hadn't been out this way in a long time. The smell of clover, hay and manure brought with it sense memories of years gone. Hannibal came to stand beside Will, who was leaning against a fence as he watched a few sheep wander.

“I didn't realize you kept livestock,” Will said in way of greeting him.

“My family has always practiced some form of husbandry, though now we employ professionals to see to the animals and vineyards.” Hannibal smiled, noticing Will had yet to look at him and seemed content to waste time with idle small-talk than bring up any of his obvious concerns. He stepped closer, sharing the same post Will clung to. “Robertus told me the news: you now have your very own bank account attached to the Lecters, Gabriel.”

“I didn't want it. I *don't* want it. I had no part in creating it,” he insisted. Will sounded on the verge of tears. “I was never a Lecter.”

Hannibal turned to face him, leaning against the sturdy, weathered fence. “Even with Nigel?”

“You were right.” Will mirrored his movements, forcing himself to look into Hannibal's eyes. “Nigel and I didn't live as a couple. To the world, we were friends. I would have never pushed for more. I never wanted his money.”

“And yet, you have it.”

“Are you angry?”

The question surprised Hannibal, although it shouldn't have. For all Will knew, he and Hannibal had done nothing but regard one another with suspicion. There had been moments in between, soft and quiet, when they each put away all the sharp pieces of themselves they kept always at the ready. Capable of drawing blood if need be. Ample opportunity for either of them to enact their plans. If this all was somehow part of Will's plan.

Hannibal couldn't fool himself into thinking it was.

If the accident had never happened, Will would have continued on with his guise undetected for who knew how long. The shape of that timeline took form in Hannibal's mind. Nigel bringing Will, his Gabi, into their lives. His twin's charming husband. Katinka's doting father. No chaos or scandal to threaten the domesticity and peace Will found for himself after fleeing the ruins of his former life. The echoes of what could have been hurt to think on, made a roiling clamminess try to settle in his stomach.

“I'm not,” he promised. The wind picked up and Will pulled the cuffs of his green flannel shirt over his fingers. Hannibal put a hand to his elbow to guide him back towards the castle. “Come back inside. I'll make a fresh pot of coffee.” Will was still hesitant, pulling against his hold. Hannibal stepped closer and smiled at the guarded look Will gave him. “Very well. If it

makes you happy to hear, I am very angry. With you, Gabriel. It's all your fault: the decisions Robertus made without consulting you first."

Will broke eye contact, a breath of laughter aimed at the ground as he shook his head. Without looking up, he said, "You do sound rather enraged."

"Incensed, even." Hannibal tugged on his sleeve and finally Will fell into step with him. "There is only one way to make up for such a terrible affront."

"Oh?"

"I expect you to attend my dinner party tomorrow evening." Hannibal smirked at the look of dread on Will's face. Not a social butterfly, then.

He wanted to argue, make excuses, but it was a request he couldn't deny. Will dug the hole and Hannibal saw no point in not letting him roll right into it. Will sighed and closed his eyes for a moment as if the thought of having dinner with Hannibal and fifteen other people physically hurt him. "Okay. If that's what you want."

"It is. And then all will be forgiven."

* * * * *

Since the previous evening, Hannibal had done nothing but triple-check the menu, answer calls from expected guests and begin on some of the preparation for the courses. The staff that would assist him for the event was not the one he usually employed, but they came highly recommended and he had no complaints thus far. Already dressed in most of his outfit for the evening, protected by his customary apron, he stood with the sous chef at the island and finished last-minute touches to the beginning courses.

Hannibal spared a look around the bustling kitchen. It was hectic, but everyone in the room knew their place. The steps to an elaborate dance, where faltering could end in something as innocent as spilled cream or as severe as an agonizing burn. Fire and ice. Acid and alkali. Marriage and melding of flavors to soothe or tantalize, with Hannibal's own twist added to each dish. The best form of control. A sacred communion not many understood they partook of at his table.

The most intimate and elaborate form of theater.

Hannibal murmured praise and instructions to his sous chef before taking up his jacket and left the room. Tonight was a celebration, but he kept with tradition and wore all black in his continued mourning. The floral silk jacquard of his jacket was the only flair of color amidst all the shades of black. And like Persephone bursting onto the earth from Hades, Mischa came into the dining room in a spill of golds and greens to deliver life and vibrancy to the once dead and drab. He came to her and took up her hand to kiss.

Mischa smiled and ran her free hand along the sharp line of his lapel. "So stark." Her smile was a sad, fragile thing as she stepped closer and kissed his cheek. "This is your night, Hannibal. Please try to find some joy in it," she said against his shoulder.

Hannibal shuttered away any sadness she might have sensed in him and gave her his most charming smile. “With you beside me, I can't feel anything but.”

She only laughed and shook her head, stepping to the side. He hadn't seen Will all day. True, he knew he was never too far from him, but Castle Lecter afforded its inhabitants the luxury of remaining lost if they didn't want to be found. For most of the day, if Will wasn't hunched over his computer, he was outside. It couldn't be helped, then, the way Hannibal took a moment to admire the image he made.

Will looked wonderful. The dark rust color of his shirt brought out the flush of his cheeks and the chestnut of his hair. His wardrobe choices for the evening hinted at Mischa's helping hand. He had yet to trim his hair. The lightly styled curls happened to be the perfect length to hide the scar on his forehead he was so unnecessarily self-conscious of. When Hannibal leaned in to relieve Will of Katinka, he couldn't stop from taking in the scent of him. The faint vanilla and tobacco leaf of whatever he used in an attempt to tame his hair and the sea salt and ozone of his cologne. Rose milk and honey in what he soothed his freshly-shaved face. Feverish pain and medication only bitter, fading notes beneath.

“Thank you for joining us, Gabriel. And for bringing Katinka.” Hannibal kissed the top of Katinka's head and rubbed her back as she made herself comfortable against his chest. He smiled as her attention became completely stolen by the sprawling arrangement of black magic roses and snowdrops, glossy black feathers and dark fruits woven in and among polished animal skulls.

“Can't exactly fake an excuse not to come. You know where I live.”

And Hannibal would have hunted him down to deliver him straight to the table, if Will broke his promise. Hannibal ignored Will's lack of enthusiasm as more guests were shown in. He handed Katinka off to Mischa and didn't try to hide his amusement at the look of envy on Will's face as Katinka was taken to play while dinner began. Still, it wasn't Hannibal's intention for Will to be uncomfortable or unhappy for the evening and was there to hand him a full flute of champagne once he was shown his seat to the right of Hannibal's.

Hannibal received Murasaki himself and pulled out her chair across from Will. She and Robertus stole the room's attention, both dressed in blue and exuding every bit of the nobility they were. Timeless and elegant and Hannibal's source of stability and comfort for most of his life. It was his honor and pleasure, more than he could ever convey, that they were both beside him to enjoy such a night at his table.

Robertus claimed the seat beside Murasaki but pulled Hannibal into a hug before he sat. “My Lady and I are so proud of you, Hannibal. We cannot wait to see what other grand accomplishments you garner.”

Hannibal couldn't speak over the emotions that suddenly choked him. He only let his uncle hold him tighter for a brief moment more before he was released to play host. After he spoke with a few guests, he came to stand behind his seat at the head of the table to take in what his successes had won him over the years.

The elite of Vilnius. The most powerful in the medical profession. Mentors. Colleagues. Friends and subtle enemies all joined him at his table in their finest. Glittering and refined and decadent. Drab and banal compared to his family. So much more than what this rabble could ever hope to be. But they weren't without their uses and had given Hannibal endless amounts of amusement and advantages over the years. They all came so eagerly to his table. How could he refuse to feed them?

Once the last of his guests were settled, Hannibal drew their attention with a few taps on his glass of champagne that rang out over the low chatter. “Thank you all for joining me tonight. I know there was some confusion and aggravation in rescheduling everyone's busy lives. Your understanding and patience, as well as your continued support, are greatly appreciated by myself and my family during this dark time. A little over a year ago, I decided to begin the task of arranging my retirement. Due to unforeseen and tragic circumstances, I had to put final arrangements on hold for a while. However, I am happy to announce I am now, officially, a former colleague to most of you tonight. Former colleague but still a friend. May we continue to meet for joyous occasions and leave our sorrows behind us.”

Hannibal raised his glass to them as applause swelled up around him. The cheer grew more excited as he sat and the first course was served. He selected every dish carefully. Old, comforting favorites and some to represent a future of continued experimentation and celebration of life out of death. It seemed more than appropriate after everything that had happened. Hannibal watched over his guests and loved ones as a parade of scintillating fare came and went, passing their smiling lips and washed down with only the best spirits.

He could almost feel the tendrils of mortality weaving all around them.

Such a feeling brought to the forefront of his mind all the things he recently lost. There was, however, much he gained, as well. The great joke of it all, though, was that one never knew what was to be had next, or ripped away. Life was precious. Life was fragile. Hannibal looked down the long line of the elaborately set table and focused on the place set at the opposite end. Empty but not ignored. In that moment, he never felt so sure of himself and the choices he made to get to where he was now.

He would never keep himself from indulging in what he wanted. He would never abstain from anything that made him happy. Life was far too short and, even then, sometimes the mortal coil was severed shorter still. If it was a vow to Nigel, he wasn't sure, but thought made him smile.

The dinner passed in light conversation and frivolous small talk. Lucky for him, his beautiful Mischa sat down further towards his guests and seemed to bewitch them all into conversations focusing mainly on her and their interest in her projects. It gave him the freedom to focus on Will, and his steadily growing silence. At the beginning of every course, he leaned close to explain each dish. Will was overwhelmed before the first plate was set before him. Sights, sounds and more people around him than he was used to overloading his acute senses. Hannibal enjoyed having Will's focus when he wasn't having quiet exchanges with Murasaki and Robertus.

Between lighthearted conversations with his guests further down the table, Hannibal happily guided Will through dinner. They had just finished the fish course. Grilled red snapper with

green beans. He noted Will's enjoyment and vowed to remember his obvious preference to seafood. And then came the seventh course. Hannibal was especially proud of it as he supplied the meat himself. A personal recipe and a favorite that he found himself eager to share with Will, to witness his reactions.

The artfully arranged plate was set before them all and Hannibal leaned close to Will as he explained, “Roasted bone marrow and grilled scallops with lemon-ginger butter, accompanied by a parsley salad and grilled baguettes.”

Without needing to be instructed, Will picked up the fluted scoop to scrape some of the lush filling out of one of the pieces of bone on his plate. He spread it on the golden baguette and took a delicate, testing, bite. Hannibal couldn't help staring, transfixed as a wistful smile teased at the corner of Will's mouth after he took a few moments to savor the bite.

“It's not often I have the opportunity to eat marrow. I forgot how delicious it can be.”

Hannibal smiled as he picked up his own scoop. “Sadly, bones and marrow are often discarded. Over the years, I have perfected the ways to use every bit of the animals I choose for slaughter.”

Will swallowed his champagne as he gave his plate an appreciate once-over. “One of your recipes? I assumed you had your party catered.”

The idea of such a thing surprised a chuckle out of Hannibal. “No, I would never do that. I always insist on cooking repeatedly with the sous chef before a party. I have to explain my recipes, make sure they are completely understood, before I let anyone take control of my kitchen.”

“Perfectionists are often control freaks,” Will said and if Hannibal hadn't spent so much time in his company lately he might have missed the cheekiness beneath his quiet remark.

It would be discourteous of Hannibal to deny such an obvious charge, so he merely accepted the accusation and refreshed Will's drink. Will tried to tamp down his smile and Hannibal couldn't help winking at him as he topped him off. Will's laughter was a rare and addictive sound. So often he was melancholy and brooding than allow himself a moment of levity. He bemoaned the idea of Will retreating into moroseness once more and was adamant to keep his mind off anything too serious a little while longer.

However, just as he was about to lure Will into more conversation, he was interrupted by the one guest he had at once regretted inviting and anticipated their eventual confrontation. Hannibal kept from smiling at the predictability. Still desperate for his attention even though he hid beneath layers of well-practiced indifference. Haughty. Vain. He knew if he looked he would only find an angelic face and a sinfully sweet smile aimed his way and he wasn't disappointed. Honeyed words on a soft voice. Fangs and poison beneath. Beside him, Will stiffened slightly as if picking up on Hannibal's hackles raising, but they both were subtle in their shifts in demeanor and no one else at the table had any idea.

“Repeat yourself in English, please.” Hannibal interrupted the lilting questions, relishing the look of shock and confusion his guest quickly masked. “I explained to everyone earlier that

my brother-in-law is not yet fluent in our language. It would be rude of us to leave him out of conversation. Would it not, Kasparas?"

One of the things Hannibal admired about Kasparas was his ability to adapt and overcome most situations he fell into. He wouldn't be cowed, not by such a mild chastisement. No blushing or stammering, hardly a pause as his earlier surprised faded completely beneath perfect manners and a beautiful, if frigid, smile. "Forgive me." His apology was to Will but then his dark blue eyes settled again on Hannibal. A trace of a smirk on his pretty mouth meant only for Hannibal to see. "I forgot your *brother-in-law* is staying with you. It is good that he is finding comfort in you, in his time of loss."

"We can all only try."

Kasparas nodded as if he agreed and took another drink of champagne. "If you are making accommodations, even more than prohibiting certain languages from upsetting his little ears, then I'd say you're well on your way to pleasing him however you can, Hannibal. Anyway, I was only asking, now that you have retired and handing over the mantle, what your plans are? Gardening? Golfing? Lovers half your age?" That roused a titter of good-natured laughter from his older colleagues, some who had already gone into retirement.

"I doubt I would have time for such trifles, even if I wanted them. I assure you, I will be quite busy. Hospital or no."

"What with? You've been awfully secretive these past months." Kasparas wouldn't let him slide with vague fillers. And now that he had him in front of guests? Oh, yes, he would get what he wanted one way or another.

Hannibal took his time preparing a perfect bite of scallop and salad, enjoying the tender fruity notes of the meat paired with the simple but exquisite dressing on the parsley. He dabbed at his mouth with a black and red lace napkin before he spoke. "After I finish transitioning from my medical practice, I am going to pursue one in psychiatry."

"Really?"

Will's surprised delight brought Hannibal's thoughts back from the ever-growing temptation of shoving his marrow scoop into Kasparas' throat. Before he could answer, Kasparas focused on Will. A shark circling possible prey. "Does the subject interest you—Gabriel, is it?"

"Yes." His tone was polite but didn't invite further conversation. Not from Kasparas, anyway. Will wasn't allowing himself to be drawn into their verbal quagmire. He might not know the specifics, but he seemed to pick up on the tension enough that his own defenses were rising, should Kasparas grow brave.

"A strange hobby for a lounge singer, but then, we all have our things."

"Cellist," both Hannibal and Will corrected. It was a childish tactic, especially from someone like Kasparas. The fact that he could still bring the younger man to such a degree of obvious pettiness amused Hannibal like nothing else. However, he was tired of such games and ended the conversation between the three of them by leaning once more into towards Will, his

words only for him. “The mind has always interested me. Some wounds cannot be healed by scalpels and stitches. Sometimes, it takes a lot more. And I doubt there will be a risk of anyone dying from my therapy.”

A look of interest and understanding flashed in Will's eyes and Hannibal remembered his former occupation. Working for an organization like the Behavioral Science Department, briefly or not, one would need some form of psychological knowledge in their background. He wondered what Will's was. Did he have a credentials list as long as Hannibal's? A mind as sharp as his, and his attention to detail, would make him a sought after expert in the field of profiling and forensics.

One day, Hannibal would ask and Will would easily share his secrets.

Will brought his flute against Hannibal's in a gentle toast. His good humor dimmed the slightest bit as their plates were cleared for the next course. Hannibal tried not to tease him too terribly. Will had been an excellent guest, despite his reservations beforehand. And it would have been impossible for someone such as him to not sense the cold scorn wafting it's way towards them from further down the table. He said nothing, did nothing, to hint at his discomfort. It helped that if Hannibal was not keeping him engaged in conversation, Murasaki or Robertus were.

However, that was not to say that as soon as the mignardise was served, Will was as twitchy as a little squirrel and almost vibrating with his need to escape. Hannibal wished he had planned more than twelve courses. Next time. His guests smiled and murmured praise as the last bite was placed before them. It wasn't the most elaborate petit four that ever left his kitchen, but he was quite proud of it. Crisp, buttery shortbread formed into a small round “cake.” Rose and orange blossom waters worked into the simple dough. A drizzle of manuka honey. One golden apricot kernel on top of each. Beautiful, a bit sweet, a tad bitter and a little cyanide never hurt anyone. A decadent treat that would prove poisonous if over-indulged. Such was life. A perfect ending to this particular dinner.

Will brought the bite to his lips as Hannibal did. Hannibal watched him as he chewed, pure dalectation flitting over his features as the flavors teased his senses. Will licked a drop of honey off his bottom lip before hiding his smile in the delicate cup of strong, unsweetened black tea that was served alongside the final course. Another round of applause rose from the table as Hannibal stood and declared the meal over. As he directed his guests to the sitting room for drinks and after-dinner amusements, Will vanished from his place beside him.

Hannibal smiled at his rudeness. Slippery fellow. No matter, he'd track him down later.

He gave Will five minutes. In that time, he mingled as expected of him. There was music softly playing, conversations steadily flowing and no one's glasses ever ran dry. Kasparas was somewhere far from him. With the mood he was in, that was fortunate. Most likely he was rubbing elbows and networking with some of Hannibal's now-former colleagues. Good riddance. He managed to get behind the bar and pour two glasses of one of the digestivi that was a personal favorite of his and made it out of the room without garnering any unwanted attention.

He was intercepted in the foyer. Luckily, it was by someone he didn't completely despise. “Dr. Petrauskas,” Hannibal happily greeted his former mentor. “I'm very happy you and your wife could join us tonight.”

“As our we, Hannibal. Congratulations! You've earned it.” Dr. Petrauskas studied him over the rims of his perpetually sliding glasses and smiled. “We are both retired men of our field. I think it is time you started calling me by my first name.”

It was an old scolding and Hannibal smiled and nodded his acquiescence. “Very well, Dovyd. Have you enjoyed yourself tonight?”

“Of course. I was just telling Ilona how much I've missed your dinner parties when we received your invitation.”

“Yes,” Ilona chimed in—a glittering, fur-cloaked ornament hanging from her husband's arm. “It has been too long since you dazzled us all with your hospitality.”

“I apologize for the wait.”

“Not at all!” Ilona gasped and clutched at the diamonds and emeralds at her neck with a gloved hand. “We didn't expect to find a rescheduled invitation in our mailbox until some time had passed. Honestly, I don't know how you do it, Hannibal. With everything that has happened, I don't know how I would face each day.”

“Not without a morning dose of Diazepam.” Dovyd patted his wife's hand.

“We are all mourning, in our own way. It is important to not allow this tragedy to keep us from carrying on.” It was always interesting to Hannibal that no one could tell when his smiles were fake. At the moment, the longer his guests spoke to him, the more it felt like a snarl was building in his throat.

“I never met your brother...” Dovyd fished.

“Nigel.”

“Yes. You rarely spoke of him.”

Ilona and a few others nearby listened closer to his and Dovyd's exchange. No matter the rung of society, gossip was always a sought after commodity. “Nigel had a full, busy, life in Romania and mine was here. Rarely did they overlap enough to speak of it at school or work.”

“It is good you have taken Nigel's family in.” Katryna Rubis joined their small circle and Hannibal accepted her kiss with a smile. They had a long, on-again-off-again affair when they were students and while they worked their residencies. Now, if he remembered right, she was the head of the board of administrators at a hospital in Kaunas. Her smile was playful, eyes mischievous. “You are very good with your niece. Fatherly, as shocking as that is to say.”

“Katinka is the brightest spot in all of this,” Hannibal said and his smile was once more genuine as he thought of her.

Katryna laughed and shook her head, incredulous. “That. That expression. I never thought I'd see you so enamored with anyone.”

Hannibal shrugged. “The last time you spent a substantial amount of time with me, I was very young. People change, as do their priorities.”

Katryna nodded, letting it be, but there was still that gleam in her pretty brown eyes. “It's great to see you happy. You deserve it, Hannibal. Being a caretaker suits you. Your little one has been through enough, and she will only bloom with your family's love. And the young man. He is lucky to have you in this terrible time.”

Soft giggles and murmured agreements came from the group surrounding him. Hannibal knew what Katryna was implying. A topic of much debate amongst them all, it seemed, in no small part because of Kasparas' teasing. He felt no need to correct the assumption. To them all, Hannibal was a playboy who loved a good fling. Let them think what they would. After tonight, none of them would ever be around Katinka again. Or Will.

That wasn't to say that having so many of his guests gleefully making insinuations about Will didn't *not* make him want to bite their wagging tongues right out of their skulls.

He took a step away from them all. “As it happens, I was on my way to find Gabriel. Please enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Over the past few days, Hannibal continued to call Will “Gabriel.” It felt like something rotten on his tongue but it was important to keep up the pretense. If Will knew what they did he might run and Hannibal couldn't allow such a thing to happen. One day, Will wouldn't be skittish with them, with him. Hannibal could wait as long as it took. Until then, he would stomach the lie that felt heavy as a stone whenever it fell from his lips.

He left the section of the ground floor that was designated for the party-goers and stalked down the quiet, darkened hallway to the study. Before the evening began, he gave his staff the extra order of keeping an eye on Will. They did their job well and thoroughly, coming to him now and then to report his whereabouts.

It was no trouble at all to find Will on his own. Murasaki and Robertus had Katinka with them. His excuse to leave the party early was unavailable. Hiding was his next best strategy of avoiding Hannibal's friends. Will turned from the large windows as he opened the door, apprehension fading when he saw who discovered him. Hannibal came to where he had been looking out over the darkening estate.

He held out the tumbler he brought for Will, who studied the milky green liquid curiously. “Chartreuse,” he explained, “The blend of herbs and spices in the liqueur should help you digest such a large meal as the one you just forced yourself through.”

Will grunted, unimpressed with Hannibal's pleasure at his expense. He took a sip and considered the drink again, surprised at the pleasant flavor. “Shouldn't you be entertaining

your guests?”

“Is that not what I'm doing?” Hannibal took his own sip and sighed. Will mirrored his movements as he leaned to rest against the window sill behind them. “I'd rather make sure your needs are being seen to than suffer through more boringly polite conversation with the mindless rabble currently fluttering through my house.” His annoyance earned him a laugh.

“You had to invite most of them, didn't you?”

“For appearances sake, yes. Fortunately, they are a handful of people I won't have to bother with after tonight.”

“Oh? No connections to keep well-oiled for business purposes?”

“None that I need.” That might be too harsh. “I suppose I can keep in distant contact. Christmas card contact.”

“How generous of you. I'm sure Kasparas will wait every year by his mailbox with bated breath for your kind well-wishes.” Will chuckled again, enjoying Hannibal's ire. “What's his problem, anyway?”

Hannibal put their empty glasses down and came to stand before Will, easing him away from the window with a gentle hold on his right wrist. “I noticed you didn't wear your splint tonight. You made it through dinner without any hint of pain, not from your injuries anyway.” He stalled answering only long enough to begin an impromptu session of rang of motion exercises on his wrist. Will wouldn't let him avoid explanation for the strange display at dinner for long. “Kasparas is the young, brilliant doctor who will be taking over the majority of my duties.”

“So I'm your last patient?”

“Officially, yes. Remind me to bill you.”

His tone had grown hesitant and Hannibal's lips twitched into a subtle smirk. Would his curiosity get the best of him? Was he bold enough to ask what he wanted? Will was quiet for a moment, using the silence as an excuse to concentrate on moving his wrist and fingers as instructed. Hannibal watched out of his periphery as Will's head tilted the slightest bit, as if listening to something.

“You two were close once, now there's just cruel rivalry.”

“Yes, just not in the way he wanted to be, hence the rivalry.”

“What did he want?”

“Me. For a time I wanted the same, but I made a mistake. I thought he was something he's not.” At Will's look of surprise, Hannibal could only shrug. There was no point in being vague or making excuses for his moment of weakness. “He's beautiful and smart, but that could be said about a horse or prized bull. I have no use for just one more decoration. Beautiful and dangerous, but in a banal and predictable way. Not in a way that lasts. Not in a

way that cuts deep and deadly, leaving something new and exquisite behind after its destruction.” His honesty won him another laugh.

“You want something beautiful that draws blood, that can equally maim as well as love?”

“Doesn't everyone?”

Will didn't deny him. He allowed the exam a few minutes more. Hannibal traced the veins along his forearm, pressing now and again to feel Will's muscles tense and resist the pressure. What was once frail, broken and scared stood before him strong and hale. Not whole. Not just yet. But Hannibal was pleased with Will's progress.

In the middle of another set of exercises, Hannibal could admit as he watched how taken with Will he was. The further from the fugue of the accident, there was more to find interesting and endearing about Will. The party was a perfect way to see just how different Will was now from the creature clinging to life in a hospital bed only a little over a month ago. All of his unique gifts. His ability to blend in, not be seen. It was almost uncanny, the way in which Will effortlessly plucked thoughts and facts as if out of the air. He could read the mood of a room and the people in it with an ease few possessed.

Out of the dull and drab was Will. Throughout the evening, Hannibal found himself seeking Will out, wanting his attention. Needing to keep their conversations from dying. And here he was now. Happily ignoring his guests for a few more stolen moments. It was a wise choice and he couldn't say he was disappointed at the turn of their conversation.

That Will knew enough of the reasons for the tension between him and Kasparas made excitement trickle along his nerves. Hannibal wanted Will to know, wanted him to see further into who he was, what was hidden behind the facade so many others were dazzled by. He had a feeling Will wouldn't shy away if ever he did manage to slip over Hannibal's walls.

He straightened Will's sleeve and let him button his cuff. “I would say your wrist is completely healed. Though, it may be weakened. Try to gently work it back to full strength.”

“I won't overdue it, I promise, Docter.”

Hannibal looked away from Will's playful smirk to glance at the clock on the wall. It was getting late enough to where Katinka would be wanting her father and her crib. There was something he had planned for Will and was shocked to find he was hesitating. It was appalling to realize he was nervous.

Hannibal refused to second-guess himself. He had gone forty-four years without doing so and he wouldn't start now. “Gabriel, if you're not too attached to your hiding spot, I was wondering if you would care to follow me up to my office? I have something for you.”

“Oh?” Will motioned for him to lead the way. “As much as I am loathe to miss any pretentious jokes or more thrilling stories of what happened at someone's summer villa, you have successfully intrigued me.”

“I would hope you find me more interesting.”

“Only just.” Will's voice was schooled into a bored drawl. “There was a mix-up with the wine list at Dr. Patronus' manor. They were supplied with only reds. Her mistress only drinks white.”

“The horror.”

They managed to slip to the second floor without being noticed. Hannibal tried to be quiet though he couldn't completely smother his laughter at Will's snark. Will *really* hated being surrounded by vapid socialites. It made Hannibal want to start planning his next party. The thought made him smile and it was still present when he retrieved the package from his desk and handed it over.

“It's not from our library, before you even ask,” Hannibal said as he watched Will unwrap the parcel.

“Hannibal...” Will's delighted whisper of his name was his only reaction. His eyes were fixed on the book in his hands. He traced the title carefully of the hardback copy of *The Divine Comedy* with reverent fingertips. He finally brought his gaze to Hannibal's and even as he looked to make a refusal, he tucked the book against his ribs. “I'll just add this to my bill, then, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal laughed and stepped closer. “It's a gift. One that I knew you would love and that is payment enough.” A charming blush of pleasure filled Will's cleanly shaven cheeks and Hannibal's smile grew at the reflexive display. He really was rather handsome.

There came a quiet knock at the door and they turned, happy to see Murasaki at the entryway. She had Katinka with her. She wasn't fussing, didn't appear to have been crying, but the mauve hairband she wore earlier was nowhere to be found and her shoes were missing. When Katinka noticed Will and lifted grasping hands out to him, he was immediately on his way to relieve Murasaki.

“How has she been,” Will asked as he cradled her in the crook of his arm.

“The most well-behaved baby. She is, however, at her limit.” Murasaki smiled and leaned down to kiss Katinka's head before he bid Will a goodnight and retreated back downstairs.

Before Will left to see to Katinka, he returned to Hannibal to grab the book from his desk. He secured the hefty tome under his arm, hardly disturbing Katinka in the process. That he did not want to release either made a warm pressure pulse in Hannibal's stomach.

“Thank you, Hannibal.” Will shook his head, an incredulous smile teasing the corner of his mouth. “I don't know what else I can say.”

“There's nothing else *to* say. You're welcome.” Hannibal reached out to trace Katinka's chubby cheek and he smiled down at her as she seemed to press into the touch. “Goodnight, my darling. Have a pleasant evening, Gabriel.”

Will left after that and Hannibal was loathe to return to the party. But he came downstairs and laughed and joked, made promises to keep in touch and agreed to attend some event or

another. Even retired, he had no intention of letting his social calendar stagnate. The group of guests dwindled, now it was an intimate handful. His phone vibrated in his pocket and he excused himself from the conversation on the latest technique in scopic procedures.

When he stepped outside he noticed a light snow had begun to fall. Hannibal wandered down to one of their small gardens before he accepted the call. “Hello, Lidija.”

“Hannibal. I hope you are well.” Lidija sounded in good spirits. That was promising.

“As well as circumstances allow us. You said earlier this week that you found some things.”

“A veritable treasure chest of goodies, I assure you. You will be more than pleased.”

“When it comes to you, I always am, my friend.”

“Will you be able to meet at our usual place? Give me at least two days to return and refresh. Monday, say half-past twelve?”

“Perfect. I'll make reservations.”

“See you then. Give my love to your family.”

Hannibal hung up and made his way back to the house. He felt shaken with excitement. Everything seemed to be falling into place. He should leave tonight, let Robertus know not to expect him for at least a day or two. He had a feeling whatever Lidija had for him would need all his attention and demand further planning. As he rounded the corner, his pace slowed until he stopped beside his wayward guest. Kasparas was leaning against the cold stone of Castle Lecter, staring up at the clear sky. The stars were especially bright out here, away from the light pollution of the cities.

Smoke curled out of his mouth in a gentle, lazy tendril. He glanced to Hannibal and smiled as he held out his cigarette to him. Always a challenge, always a dare. Hannibal took it from his gloved fingers to suck in a deep drag. He still smoked the same blend. Traces of clove and sage tickled Hannibal's throat and gave his lungs a pleasant burn. Hannibal leaned on the wall next to him, sharing warmth but not returning the cigarette. He wouldn't be getting it back.

Kasparas breathed a small laugh at his obvious tactic but didn't show any kind of anger at Hannibal's disapproval of his habit. He never did. “Well,” Kasparas clapped his gloved hands together and pushed away from his perch, “this has been fun, but I should head out.”

“Another pressing engagement?”

Kasparas smiled down at his shoes as they crunched the frost covering the dead leaves beneath his feet. “Not really. My check-in is tonight.” He pulled his coat sleeve down to read the shining watch clasped to his wrist. Subtle and sophisticated. A replacement for the Breitling Hannibal gifted to him. “In just a few hours, actually.”

Hannibal made an interested noise and fell into step with him as he started for his car. “Where are your reservations?”

“The PACAI.”

“Excellent choice. Another weekend get-away?”

Kasparas laughed again and shook his head, sharing a smile at their memories. “No.” He shrugged and dug in his pocket for his keys, starting the engine to warm the interior. “I officially take over all the things you're leaving behind later this week. I thought a few days of rest and relaxation beforehand was a good idea.”

Hannibal remembered the hotel. It wasn't too far from where his meeting place with Lidija was scheduled. Yet another detail started to work itself out. Kasparas unlocked his door and turned to bid farewell to his host but let out a small gasp of surprise when he found Hannibal close. Hannibal stepped further into his space, pressing on until Kasparas' weight shut the driver's side door with a gentle click. As much as Hannibal knew Kasparas hated him most of the time, there were other occasions he welcomed his warmth and touch.

Hannibal smiled as he traced gentle fingertips along his jaw before he turned Kasparas' collar up to protect such vulnerable flesh from the cold. “Why not make it a longer stay?”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal is so delightfully wicked. :) I don't think he's as mercurial as Will. It's just that everyone in his pool of acquaintances is a possible tool to use. People are either food, amusements or tools and those statuses are interchangeable at all times. Except for his family. :) It's been fun playing around with his feelings for Will. I warned earlier, his thoughts and feelings are going to become super sweet and a tad obsessive. :) He doesn't quite understand why he holds Will in such regard. He's never been in love. All he's ever known is transactional games and it's been great exploring the way I think he would evolve if in this situation.

I hope you all enjoyed that. Thanks for stopping by and see you next Thursday. In the meantime, please try to stay safe, sane and healthy!

~CReed

Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

> Hey there! I'm so happy I got to update today. There was a bit of a technical problem with the chapter. Long story short, I had to rewrite about half of it. I think it turned out nice. It might be one of my personal favorites so far. ;) Before I let you get to it, I just want to thank EmilyElm, Stralovat, Ruthless330 and Welcome2the_Goondocks for taking the time to leave such lovely and thoughtful comments. You're very kind, and I really appreciate that you let me know you're enjoying the story.
>
> Hope you all like what happens, it was fun to write. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight

In Hannibal's considerable experience, he found it best that when the universe presented one with an opportunity, whatever it may be, one must seize it. He hadn't planned on ever seeing his former lover again. God knew the vows of ending all contact Kasparas spat at him the last time they parted ways. Yet, here they were. Kasparas' wrath had cooled exponentially and Hannibal was expected in the same city in just a few days.

Hannibal had quite a few things he needed to do, with the great possibility of his errand list growing, and he needed to not be seen doing it. Using Kasparas as both diversion and entertainment was the perfect solution. The younger man proved to be a wonderful alibi time and again. It gave Hannibal a pleasing feeling of nostalgia to have Kasparas aid him in such a way. It took no time at all to make a last minute reservation. Hannibal booked five days for the Hotel PACAI's best room, planning for any and all development that might occur with Lidija's findings.

He would reimburse his companion, of course, for the room already reserved but Hannibal didn't think he would mind. Kasparas would arrive first and be able to indulge in all the amenities the upgrade gave them. It was rather pleasant to have the beautiful man waiting for him, glass of wine prepared for him, when he arrived an hour and a half later. It was late when he got there, later still when they fell into an exhausted sleep a little before dawn broke.

So it went for three charming days. It didn't take any effort at all to keep Kasparas blinded and busy as his meeting with Lidija drew closer. Whenever Kasparas wasn't demanding his attention, Hannibal used the opportunities to set up contact with a few friends who owed him favors. Friends who could deal with his growing problems with Freddie Lounds and Mason Verger through less legal channels than Lidija and her company could navigate.

By the time he left the hotel, Kasparas gone for a massage and treatments, Hannibal was tranquil and languid, ready for whatever Lidija might have found. He strolled the few blocks down from the hotel to a favored restaurant and found Lidija at their usual table. They were both early, as he knew they would be and set the reservation time accordingly. He smiled as he sat down, taking her hand up in a customary kiss.

“Good afternoon, Lidija. As always, you are a vision to behold.” One would never guess the red-haired beauty across from him had just spent the last few weeks running around Romania.

“And you are still unfairly handsome. It is good to see you, my friend. I hope you and yours are well.” Lidija was fresh-faced and well-rested, sharp and stunning in her fitted suit.

“As well as can be expected.”

They let the waitress take their order and enjoyed mindless small-talk over coffee while they waited for her to return. After they were sure to not be interrupted again, Lidija took up her briefcase to rummage through. Hannibal pushed his tapas aside to take the three folders of varying thickness she handed over. He started on the topmost folder, the thickest. The photo clipped to the first page made him forget everything else around him.

Nigel. Taken in recent years. A candid scene, face turned from the lens. Looking out the window of a cafe onto a busy street. He kept his hair longer, more silver-blond than Hannibal's darker chocolate ash.

Lidija motioned toward the picture. “I got that, and most other photos, from his office. His business partner took a little bit to warm up to me, but after a few hours, let me look through Nigel's things and ask a few questions. Nigel was co-owner of four night clubs—of varying respectability—and three venues used for conventions, concerts, things like that. There's no imminent fear of his house falling behind in rent and into the possession of a landlord. Nigel owned the building his apartment was in.”

Hannibal had to make himself put the photo down and look through the sheaf of documents. He frowned as he flipped through page after page of miscellaneous records. Interesting, but not what he was after for the moment. “You weren't able to get Nigel's will and list of assets?”

“Only unofficial copies of both, I'm afraid. With the hospital still not releasing Nigel's death certificate, his lawyer's hands are tied. He allowed me a copy of these only after I showed him the contract I have with you.” She motioned to a tab in the folder and explained as he read further. “In the event of his death, Nigel left everything to his wife, Gabriela. However, since she was killed in the same accident, her possessions went to Nigel or next of kin. Which is you and Mischa, as Nigel requested. He had yet to include his daughter Katinka in his end-of-life plans.”

“Gabriela?” It slipped from his lips before he could stop himself.

“Gabriela Ibanescu. 'Gabi,' to everyone who knew her.” Lidija watched him for a moment before speaking again, quieter. “I remember over the phone you said Nigel's spouse and child

survived.”

Hannibal took a breath before nodding, collecting his wits. “Yes, unfortunately, there was a terrible misunderstanding at the hospital.” Lidija only nodded and left it at that. A small blessing. He had no idea what would happen if she offered condolences or sympathies. His control was holding together by sheer determination.

He set aside Nigel's folder to examine the contents of the second. Page upon page of a stranger's life. Cold facts. A paper trail of any run-of-the-mill civilian, living their life in a bustling city. A woman. The tax records and bank statements and education and career history were all a blur before his eyes. But he kept up the show of reading what Lidija worked so hard to find him. Any other time he would be more than pleased with the results. Right now, he had a powerful urge to stab his silverware into her eye.

His blind search came to a halt when a picture slid out from between two pages. Nigel. In some hedonistic setting. Most likely one of his clubs. At a table, sprawled along the leather bench, surrounded by people who might be friends. His shirt was unbuttoned to his collarbone, sleeves rolled above his elbows and black tie hanging from around his neck. On his lap sat a beautiful woman. His arms were around her waist in a loose but possessive hold. Scantily clad in a bold-colored silk corset and fishnets. Her hair was a vibrant shade of red.

Nigel looked younger. Just a few years ago the photo had to be taken. The woman, Gabriela, seemed painfully young. Perhaps in her twenties. They didn't have eyes for anyone else but each other as the camera caught them in a kiss. The rings on their fingers shone with the newness that symbolized their union.

“The marriage certificate is dated June 15th, 2009,” Lidija supplied as he couldn't quite bring himself to stop studying the photo just yet.

Four years ago. Just as Nigel said in the last conversation they ever had. Just as Will said the night he sat through Hannibal's interrogatory dinner. When Hannibal spoke, he was happy to hear only steadiness in his tone. “Yes. Nigel had mentioned that.”

He closed the file to retrieve the next one and immediately felt calmer for it. A baby picture. Katinka. The kind of portrait issued by the hospital after the birth. So small. Tinier than he imagined. Wisps of light blonde hair atop her rosy head. Eyes closed in slumber as she lay swaddled in a pink blanket.

“Those were the easiest to get. Katinka's records.” Lidija nodded towards the smaller stack of pages he browsed.

Hannibal looked up at that, at the incredulous humor in her voice. “Did you have trouble?”

Lidija looked him over, considering, before finally finishing wrestling with whatever she didn't want to tell him. “I found a lot of people very unhelpful, especially when I went to retrieve the death certificates. Those are usually a simple job of just going to the courthouse or lawyer, but that was not the case. Vidas told me you mentioned having trouble from the hospital, as well. I know I'm paranoid, you know I'm paranoid—”

“I prefer to think of you as cautious, careful. You actually listen to what your instincts tell you. It's one of many things I admire about you.”

She shrugged off his compliments and sipped her coffee. “Than you won't mind that I did some extra work, free of charge. I didn't find much, when I looked into some things at the hospital. What I did, I find worrisome, Hannibal. There has been no further paperwork done on those who have died in that accident. Not even to identify the missing. If any survivors pass, they are immediately put in cold storage. Nigel's Cause of Death Certificate has yet to be filed. There is nothing to find on Gabi. She's nowhere on the list of the dead or unknown. I stopped looking into the hospital and started looking into individuals connected to the hospital.” Lidija leaned closer to slide a piece of paper across to him. “All of these people have recently received large 'donations,' wired to accounts not affiliated with the hospital. All from some company overseas. American. No names attached or even an official description for the business they do.”

Hannibal looked at the list of people and his mouth twitched into a small smile when he found Dr. Balkus' name among them. A dummy company. A flimsy front with a generic name. He didn't have to guess who was behind it.

“Shall I look deeper?”

Hannibal smiled and shook his head. “That won't be necessary, Lidija. It all sounds very complicated and strange, and right now I only wish to focus on one crisis at a time.” The list fell between two folders as he stacked everything in a neat pile to put in his own briefcase. Lidija didn't notice. He took in her frown and the way she glared into the dregs of her coffee. “You seem upset.”

“I am. This has never happened to me before. Never have I returned from a job with so little. I am sorry, my friend.”

“There is nothing to apologize for, darling. You did what you could and Katinka's records and charts are worth more than gold to me.” They both stood to gather their things.

“So, this concludes my contract. You know where to find me, should you need me.” They exchanged hugs, kisses on the cheek. Before she stepped back, Lidija pulled something from her pocket. She dropped a key attached to a simple black leather fob into his palm. “Nigel's business partner had a spare key to his apartment and thought you would want it. I didn't go in, thought you might prefer to go there yourself.”

Hannibal said his goodbyes and looked down at the key a few moments more. By the time he tossed it in with the files and closed everything up, Lidija was long gone and the bill paid for their forgotten meal. Outside, the slight chill to the air had grown and Hannibal's breath became a puff of fog the moment he stepped out onto the sidewalk. He tucked his free hand into his pocket and began the journey back to the hotel. The cold barely registered. The time alone would be good for him.

Even now his hands wanted to shake. His whole body thrummed with suppressed energy, but he kept it all locked down tight. It wouldn't do to have a breakdown in the middle of the street. From the moment that name was spoken. The second his eyes clapped onto the woman

in the photo. He could feel something deep within himself wanting to snap. *Gabriela*. Nigel's *wife*. He didn't know what he was feeling. It wasn't anger. Not yet. And it wasn't sorrow. There was no word in existence for what he felt. This impotent helplessness. He couldn't lash out, for there was no enemy around. No amount of money or connections could fix this. There was nothing to fix.

There was nothing.

All Hannibal had were old photos and the messy aftermath of a life he had no part in. He wanted to scream. He wanted to rage and rant. He wanted to find Will and demand the truth. Who was he to the happy couple in the photo? Was he Will? Aiden? He for damn sure wasn't *Gabriel*. *Who was he?* Did Nigel even know, as he died protecting him? And what of Nigel's beautiful wife? Where was she in all this? *Where was she?*

The thought that Will would know, that he had something more directly to do with Nigel's death and Gabi's disappearance, made a visceral pain shoot through Hannibal's chest. Did Will know? Did he use his brother, his family, as a diversion? An opportunity? A shield? He would find out. Nothing on earth would stop Hannibal from finding out. If Will harmed Nigel, in any way, he would die. Hannibal would make Will into a glorious feast. A tribute. *In memoriam*. Hannibal would consume every part of Will. The thought brought him no joy.

So morose was he, lost in a cycle of one terrible thought after another, that Hannibal didn't recognize the din behind him for the disturbance it was. Not until a harsh voice was yelling by his ear and a strong hand pulled him around and pushed him into the cold, damp stone of the building behind him.

“Where is she, you asshole?!”

Hannibal quickly assessed their surroundings. It was still early afternoon. The sidewalk traffic was growing, people stopped going about their day to stare. They were starting to draw a crowd. A sweep of the young man before him, from the wild waves of his long brown hair to the furious and exhausted brown eyes glaring at him—not to mention the question spoken in English with an American accent—told Hannibal he was in the presence of the stranger who had approached his Mischa and came to his home.

He curled in on himself, slouching against the building, and clutched his briefcase closer. “I—I beg your pardon?” Hannibal's English was perfect, if not breathy from his impact with the wall.

“Don't fuck with me, Nigel.”

A thrill ran through Hannibal and it took everything he had not to grab the man by the throat and pull him into the alley nearby for a more private chat. Instead, he made a show of being shocked, nearly dropping his briefcase. “Nigel? Do you mean Nigel Lecter?” Before the man could throw the punch he so clearly wanted to, Hannibal stood straighter and stepped closer. “I'm his brother. His twin.”

His jaw clenched and he shook his head. “I don't believe you.”

Hannibal sighed and lifted his hand slowly to bring to his shirt collar. He pulled the starched and steamed fabric aside to reveal clear, smooth skin on the side of his neck. Understanding dawned in those doe eyes when the expected tattoo was nowhere to be found and Hannibal held out his hand, keeping his voice gentle. “Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

He eyed the gesture suspiciously but shook his hand before dropping it and taking a step back. His posture was no longer as aggressive but his urge to fight was still there, lurking beneath frayed nerves and lack of good sleep. “Charlie Countryman. Where's your brother? Where'd he take Gabi?”

“Hello, Charlie. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but my brother and his wife died a few we—”

“Yeah, some scrawny fucking psycho already tried telling me that. I don't believe you. I want to see Gabi, and that guy can threaten me all he wants, I'm not fucking leaving until someone tells me what's going on.”

That further piqued Hannibal's interest. A memory came up out of the chaos of his mind. A lovely autumn day. Being with Will on a shady path. The little, secret smile he had after asking of any further run-ins with the man before him. It settled Hannibal more than anything, to think the wolf had tried to scare this boy away from their home.

Hannibal kept his voice calm, quiet. It always helped people lower their guard. He did, after all, have an excellent bedside manner. “I understand your upset, angry. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have, as long as we don't do it on the street. Here.” He took one of his cards and his pen from his pocket to write down an address. He passed it to a stunned Charlie. “Have a taxi bring you here, tonight at nine o'clock. Don't worry about the fare, I'll pay it when you arrive.”

“Why,” Charlie asked as he stared at the business card like it might bite him.

“Because while you have questions, I have mine. I think we both will find out a great many things, once we compare notes.”

“I just want to find Gabi.” His voice cracked on her name. The wind was completely gone from his sails.

“Then you best make our appointment, hm?” When he still seemed to hesitate, Hannibal stepped closer and brought his voice to a soothing pitch. “I want to help, if I can, Charlie. And, no offense, but you're running on fumes. When was the last time you properly ate? Took a break from searching a country you're not familiar with? Join me for dinner. A good meal and simple conversation, that's all I offer.”

Charlie let out a heavy breath and nodded. “Fine. I'll be there.”

Hannibal smiled. “Wonderful. Do you have any food allergies?”

* * * * *

Hannibal didn't have time to shop like he normally would for such an occasion. He hardly had time for anything more than making a stop at a small grocery store on his way to another property of his, after he took his car from the PACAI parking garage. He left his bags in the hotel room. With any luck, this whole exchange would take a matter of hours and he'd be back to his alibi by the next morning.

A sloppy timetable, but he had worked with much worse before.

He spent some time airing out the house. An older cottage away from the city proper with a few acres of land. It wasn't renovated or decorated to the degree of some of his other places, but the electricity and plumbing worked. The basement was equipped and stocked for what he needed. Other than a little bit of dust and mustiness, it would suit his needs for the night. Charlie wouldn't notice, or care, if the bookshelves were in need of a good polishing.

The fires were lit to chase the chill away. A bottle of his favored whiskey was waiting on the drink cart in the dining room. No centerpiece. No vintage red left on ice. Dinner would be an informal affair. A comforting respite from the confusion and grief both men were feeling. Hannibal wanted it to be appropriate for what it was: a last meal. He took a guess at what Charlie might like, taking into account where he was from. And just as the side dishes were finishing up, the doorbell rang.

Right on time.

Charlie had slept and showered in the time they were apart. He was much more relaxed when he sat at the table. His manners had definitely improved as he had uttered a quiet word of thanks when his plate was set before him.

“Filet mignon, with roasted rainbow potatoes and shoyu green beans. I took the liberty of deciding 'rare' for your steak. Tell me if you prefer otherwise.”

“Rare is fine. Thank you.”

Hannibal sat, unbuttoning his suit jacket. He took up his knife and fork to cut into the meat. Blood mixed and mingled with the melted butter on his plate, creating the most decadent of sauces. He savored his first bite as he subtly watched his guest fiddle with his fork. “How old are you, Charlie? If you don't mind my asking.”

“Twenty-seven. Why?”

Hannibal gave him a kind smile. “You have that zest of youth about you, is all. Like Gabi,” he teased.

“I'm only a year older than her.”

“Were you classmates?”

“No. We met at the symphony. I was a new addition.” Charlie finally managed a bite of steak.

“Oh? Do you play the cello, as well?”

“Trombone.” His smile was sad. “Her father mentored me, when I first moved to Bucharest. Just a little over two years ago.”

Hannibal let the silence build as he loaded his fork with a perfectly balanced bite of steak and vegetables. “You are awfully subdued for a man who was so demanding of me earlier, Charlie.”

Charlie pushed a purple potato around his plate before he gave up any pretense of appetite. A shame. “Gabi's dead. She's really dead, isn't she?”

Hannibal dabbed at his mouth. The silk napkin came away stained pink. “Yes. I'm sorry.” And he was. He was sorry for Charlie and Gabi, both.

As if a floodgate broke open, Charlie wept. Had he not allowed himself to think her death was a possibility until now? Fascinating. To hold onto such hope. Hannibal waited for him to calm down and pushed a glass of whiskey towards him once he caught his breath. Charlie threw half of the three hundred-dollar liquor back in one swallow. Hannibal refilled his glass as soon as he lowered it.

“It doesn't make sense. None of it. She wasn't supposed to be on a train.”

Hannibal took a sip of his own spirit, finding the sweet burn a comfort as it slid down his throat. “What do you mean?” He kept his voice as warm and soothing as the whiskey they drank.

Charlie wiped his eyes and finished his drink, waiting quietly as it was refreshed. “Couple months ago, she came over with a plane ticket. A one-way flight to Lithuania. I thought she'd be on the same plane. Doesn't it seem like she would have been with me on the same plane?”

“Perhaps her plans changed.” Hannibal stared down into the amber shadows of his drink. “Were you in love, Charlie?”

“Yes.” No doubt. No fear. Just absolute certainty, regardless of consequences or the peril it could bring. Hannibal admired him immensely.

“Reckless boy. And what of Nigel? I imagine he didn't take your closeness with his wife well.”

Charlie sighed and pressed the heels of his palms into his reddened eyes. “God, he's such an *asshole*.” He immediately looked sheepish. “No offense.”

Hannibal chuckled and topped Charlie's drink off. “I hadn't seen my brother in nearly thirty years, Charlie. I'm sure you aren't the only one in Bucharest with a low opinion of him.”

“He never liked me.” Charlie scowled and took another gulp. “And the fact that Victor liked me more than him made him hate me.”

“Victor?”

“Gabi's dad.” When Hannibal only made a humming sound in understanding, Charlie went on, “Victor had never liked Nigel. Knew him for the thug he was on-sight, he used to tell me.”

“Was he a violent man? To Gabi?”

“No. He never laid an angry hand on her. If he had, it would have been so much easier to get her to leave him. She didn't see how he was with everyone else. She didn't care. Not until I showed her how fucked up he was.”

“How so?”

“Everyone was fucking terrified of Nigel. Fucking thought he was The Godfather. Him and his asshole partner, Darko.” Charlie sniffled as he took a drink. “I know he had something to with her plans changing. He had to. Gabi wouldn't have chose him. She wouldn't.”

Hannibal shrugged. “She had a child with him. It would have been difficult enough leaving her husband, but adding a baby to the equation? Perhaps boarding the train *was* her choice.”

“She promised me.” Charlie sobbed, choking back his tears. “She promised she was leaving him after the baby was born. I told you all this already.”

“Did you?” Hannibal smiled as his very drunk dinner guest turned to look him over with squinting eyes.

“No, not you. The other guy. He's with the woman now all the time. Nigel's sister, he'd said. Every time I see her in town, he's there. Wouldn't let me just ask her if she'd seen Gabi,” he mumbled.

Hannibal's smile grew as he guessed who Charlie was referring to. “Ah, yes. 'The other guy.' What was it you called him earlier today?”

“'Scrawny fucking psycho.'”

“Yes, that was it. That's not very kind of you, Charlie.” He watched, entirely entertained as this fiery boy slumped in his chair and his head lolled back onto the seat for a moment before it shot back up and he glared at him.

“S'true, though. You should be careful.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“He's not who he says he is.” Charlie hiccuped, completely unaware of how his host became as still as any statue in a museum. As focused and alert as a big cat watching its prey. “After he fucking *threatened* me, I went to the hospital. Thought he was full'a shit and went to see for myself if Gabi was really—if she really had—I went to find her there. This lady cornered me, asking about fucking Nigel. I told her about Gabi. About that fucking weirdo. She showed me a picture, and it was him. But he's a liar. He said he was Nigel's family. And he's not. He's not anything he says he is. He's dangerous.”

“Who was this woman, Charlie?”

“Eddie. No. Freddie. Freddie something. She gave me a phone. Can you believe that? A whole different phone to use to call her on. Like we're in some kind of goddamn spy movie.” Charlie wiggled around in his chair as he dug in his pocket.

Hannibal tracked the flip-phone as he waved it around. “What do you suppose Ms. Lounds wanted you to do with that?”

“She wanted me to let her know if I saw him again and to try and find out where he's staying. But I haven't seen him since.” Charlie tossed the phone on the table and slumped into his seat again. “Should just call the cops on the crazy bastard, if I ever see him.”

“Then it is very fortunate that you ran into me today, Charlie. I can't have you running around knowing what you do. To think, for however long you've been her contact, there's been an invisible blade hanging over Will's head. I simply cannot allow that to continue. If Will is to die, it's by my hands alone.”

His words didn't register in Charlie's alcohol-addled brain. They never would. Hannibal reached over, placed his hands on either side of Charlie's jaw and wrenched as hard as he could to the side. The delicate bones of his neck snapped. Charlie fell to the side, tumbling to the floor in a heap. Hannibal took a deep, steadying breath before he took a bite of his dinner. He smiled when he found it was still warm.

It would be a shame to let such a fine meal go to waste.

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun playing around with Hannibal's emotions this chapter. He has such epic control of his emotions and a topnotch poker face, but if we're privvy to what he's thinking, I think he feels things very deeply and genuinely. I wanted to get across how betrayed he is by the possibility of Will hurting Nigel and Gabi, of nothing being real between them. And yet at the same time, he still admires Will's manipulation skills and respects that he was able to deceive him still. I hope I was able to do that, even a little.

I also wanted there to be a time where you all got to see Hannibal in action as a hunter. What better way to show that then by revealing what exactly happened to Charlie? There will be more on that front next week. Hannibal's not finished with him yet.

I hope anyone passing by enjoyed this installment. See you Thursday! In the meantime, please stay safe, sane and healthy!

~CReed

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! I hope you're ready for this week's installment, because this is a good one. If I had to summarize, I would merely say, "Hannibal officially brings his A game." :D I hope this all makes sense. Please do let me know if you're left feeling confused or have questions. I just want to take a moment right quick to thank EmilyElm and Stralovat for taking the time to leave me such wonderful comments last chapter. I really appreciate it and your kind words are such a lift to my spirit. :D
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine

Charlie Countryman exited the mortal plane with a few bites of a home-cooked meal and a belly-full of some of the best whiskey in the world. He didn't feel any pain. In the moment of death there hadn't been any fear. Hannibal gave him that. As much peace as he could. It was the aftermath that found Charlie in limbo. Usually, he would have been placed on a hook by now, blood draining and awaiting butchering into the best cuts.

However, Hannibal found himself hesitating. Charlie's remains demanded something other than common variety slaughterhouse treatment. Something *more*. Hannibal had yet to figure out what that was. So Charlie lay spread out on the operating table in the basement while Hannibal tidied up the dining room and kitchen.

He was elbow's deep in a sink full of steaming, sudsy water when his phone rang. With one hand free and dried, he pressed the button to receive the call after seeing who it was. “Hello, Vidas.”

“Good evening, Hannibal. I hope it's not too late, or that I caught you at an inconvenient time.”

“For you, the time is never too late nor is it inconvenient, my friend.” Hannibal smiled at the small hum of acknowledgment over the connection and waited for the reason of the call as he gently washed the blood from his plate with a sponge.

“Good. I found all I could on any 'Aiden.' I emailed you three files of potential travelers. Three tickets were purchased for that train departure. There was a cancellation, one never boarded and the other man did but is unaccounted for. He was declared dead, earlier this week. I hope this helps you.”

“I'm sure it is everything I could want. Thank you, Vidas.”

“You are welcome, Hannibal.”

The line disconnected as Hannibal left the sink to empty, grabbing up his phone and glass of whiskey as he did. He settled at the breakfast nook to search for the promised email. It amused him to see Vidas included a file with the name having the Irish spelling. This was why he adored working with Vidas. He was thorough, meticulous and had a mind for details most others wouldn't think to consider. His methods had yet to disappoint Hannibal and he would have to remember to wire a bonus to Vidas the first chance he got.

Hannibal didn't bother to look through each file. He didn't have to. The second file loaded and Hannibal's pulse thrummed with renewed heat. It was a copy of the station's ticket stub they still had in their records. A name, date of departure and signature. *Aiden Teague*. Will's handwriting. Also attached was Vidas' assessment, filled with everything he could gather without having to dig too deep or go through red tape for.

Information on Aiden. Breadcrumbs that helped Hannibal construct the ever-growing, always-shifting image he had of Will.

Vidas was able to send along a photocopy of a work ID, courtesy of a well-meaning colleague. They wanted to help any way they could after being informed of Aiden's tragic demise. The ID was affiliated with one of the small colleges in Bucharest. Staring at him from the cropped photo was Will. Hannibal couldn't stop the smile stretching across his lips nor the bloom of warmth in his chest at the sight even if he had wanted to. Yet another version of Will.

A delightfully frumpy version. His hair was shorter, curls only reaching mid-forehead. Dressed in layers of muted colors. Olive green button down closed to the base of his neck, peeking out from under a hideous striped sweater. Youthful face disguised with scruffy facial hair. Eyes—that Hannibal knew for a fact were startling shades of shifting colors from storm-blue to slate to cyan—were almost completely obscured by thick-framed glasses.

Not a cellist. Not any kind of musician. A teacher. Psychology. It made something bright flutter about inside him to find out Will's field of study. He had a quiet life as a professor. In a small apartment on the rough side of the city. Vidas was kind enough to include statements from Will's colleagues he spoke with. Will was quiet, kept to himself. Students seemed to like him well. A responsible and hard-working young man. But one day, he wrote an email stating his resignation and urgent need to leave. Family emergency. He wasn't coming back.

A sudden departure. Had those who hunted him forced the wolf to flee?

Will Graham ran the same day, the same time, as Nigel Lecter.

Hannibal could see it now. The shape of it. The contours that made up the twists and bends of the convoluted event. He laughed at the happenstance and took a larger sip of his drink. Will wasn't involved at all with Nigel. Their relationship was never romantic. Just as Will said, when Hannibal felt particularly masochistic and asked. *I was never a Lecter...To the world, we were friends...* Little truths. Bits of facts laid out for everyone to gather, should they know how to look. Even when it came to Nigel and Gabi, Will told Hannibal the truth. In his own way. *Our relationship had been strained...Something had to give, or we would have broke...*

I was never a Lecter.

I like to think we would have been happy, eventually.

There was no “eventually.” Not for Nigel and his beautiful, conflicted Gabi. But Will was found with their daughter. Nigel's daughter, now an orphan. With no one else around her who knew her, aside from Will Graham. On the run, injured and alone, save for the child of his friend. Katinka in the same pitiful shape as him. Hannibal could see now Will's train of thought. If the people after him had anything to do with what happened, he would be around to protect Katinka. He would protect her from anything, his enemies and Nigel's. And the estranged relatives Nigel spoke of? They were thus for a reason. Will wouldn't abandon her to a possible life of cold and detachment.

So Will became someone else once more. A father. A husband. All the while, the hunter healed. Hannibal savored the last swallow of whiskey and the warmth of it gliding down his throat, thoughts of Will swirling about unhindered down the halls of his memory. One particular thought settled over and around him like sun-warmed fur after a blind trek through a deadly blizzard. There was nothing tying Will to Nigel but the bonds of friendship.

Illusive Inspiration set teasing touches along his mind, stilling the chaos within, and suddenly Hannibal was filled with the urge to move. His hands tingled with the need to be occupied. To manipulate the world around him. To create something tangible from his imagination.

He left his phone and empty glass behind to make his way down into the basement.

Everything he needed was always kept stocked in neat stacks in the cupboards and shelves lining the furthest wall. It took no time at all to find scrubs, coverings for his shoes and hair. Hannibal snapped gloves into place as he looked over what he had to work with. He took his time to admire the body and all the possibilities it represented. That urge came again: to create something new. Something better. Something beautiful.

It was strange, feeling this way. It had never happened to Hannibal before. He had always taken what he wanted from a body—choice cuts and whatever else needed for a specific recipe—and disposed of the rest. Only, he didn't want to dispose of anything now. Nothing was fit for the incinerator this time. All he could see was potential. So much potential, to be shaped and molded into beauty and poetry. Something Charlie could never be in life but certainly achieve in death with Hannibal's help.

It was as he pressed a scalpel to cold flesh that Hannibal fully comprehended just what he was about to do. He found his heart pounding and blood rushing in his ears. Amazed, he pulled his slightly shaking hand back, denying himself of his newly found desire. Now was not the time for experiments. If he did what he envisioned, the art he would make of Charlie, he would become known. To the public. To police. In all his years of indulging in his habits, not once had he come close to being discovered. He left nothing behind to discover.

What he wanted would draw attention and he couldn't have that. On the off chance the police performed competent work, they might circle closer to him. To his family. To Will. He simply would not allow that. No, the time wasn't right. Perhaps later. With a different subject he could take his time on.

A compromise then.

Hannibal would take Charlie's heart and turn it into something for Will. Something beautiful. Something to declare his love—for that was what he felt. He knew that now.

Hannibal was in love with Will Graham.

Every terrible, dark and lovely part of him. All the monstrous things within Hannibal recognized Will from the very beginning. Shameful, really, how long it took him to see it. But he would pay his penance. He would show Will he was safe and cared for, and this would be the first act of Hannibal's devotion.

The inspiration Will ignited within him would be given the attention it deserved. In time.

As he worked, Hannibal thought over everything Charlie told him. He let the familiar motions of surgery and butchery clear his mind further, organize what he knew and plan his next steps. Aside from the rare insight he gained on Nigel, Hannibal had learned of a connection that surprised him and sent a chill through his veins. Ms. Freddie Lounds was a very busy woman. Ambitious. Enterprising. Dangerous. Any other time he would applaud her skills to manipulate those around her, using their grief and fear for her own gains. All he could conjure within himself was an almost indescribable relief that he had ran into her unknowing agent before the little ragamuffin could do any lasting damage.

Charlie posed such a great threat to Will. The idea that Hannibal almost had him snatched away as well because of this man's ignorant fumbling stumbles filled him with something akin to panic. He just found Will. After all the games, the circling, the swipes at each other in the dark—the scales had finally been taken from Hannibal's eyes and he could *see*. His radiant Will. Hannibal could hardly believe he existed.

He would show his wolf he didn't have to hide anymore. Will could stop running. Hannibal would take his doubts and fears, his burdens and his obstacles, and make them his own. One day, Will would flourish into his best and deadliest form and Hannibal would be there to witness it.

With the renowned hands of a careful expert, Charlie's heart was removed from his chest. It was still warm. A healthy specimen. No plaque in the arteries. Not an abnormality or sign of ill health to behold. Hannibal looked it over as he packed it for travel. Thoughts and plans began to take shape. After everything he learned, what all he knew of Will Graham, Hannibal had the perfect recipe in mind for their next dinner.

He finished up as quick as possible. Charlie would be fine in the cottage's chest freezer until Hannibal came back to collect him. He took everything he needed and locked up afterwards. The night was crisp, the sky was clear and no one was up so late to see Hannibal settle a travel cooler in the trunk of his car before driving away. The drive back to the PACAI was uneventful and Hannibal kept just close enough to the speed limit to not get a ticket.

Risky, but he found himself eager to be home.

He was so deep in his head, making plans and reminders and to-do lists, that he was surprised to remember he wasn't alone when he unlocked the door to his suite and found Kasparas coming into the bedroom just as he was. Honestly, he forgot all about his lovely alibi. An incredulous, mostly fond, smile teased Kasparas' cherubic mouth as he tied the sash to his robe in a lazy knot and continued on his way to the bar with barely a pause in his step.

“Hello, stranger,” Kasparas said as he got out everything he needed for a whiskey sour. He only looked to Hannibal when he lifted the glass in offer.

“No, thank you. I won't be staying long.”

Kasparas' smile grew wider, sharper, a show of teeth before he took a delicate sip of his cocktail. “No, I don't suppose you will be.” He watched silently as Hannibal went to the dresser and closet to retrieve his clothes, tracking his every move with impassive blue eyes.

Hannibal looked him over between zipping up his suitcase and laying out his garment bag. “There was a time my appallingly neglectful behavior would have caused a scene. And at least one broken vase.” When it came to Kasparas, he could never help poking.

“Oh, at least one. Most likely that one there on the coffee table.” Kasparas sat on the chaise lounge at the foot of the bed and continued his relaxed study.

Hannibal chuckled as he took care with the suits he tucked away. “Has age and experience dampened that fiery temper of yours?”

“We're not lovers, not exclusive.”

Hannibal stopped organizing his toiletry bag to look Kasparas over. It was rather late, but he was alert if not relaxed. Soft hair damp from the bath he just had. Fresh marks adorned his neck that the fluffy bathrobe couldn't completely conceal. “Facts that you have gleefully taken advantage of, I see.”

“I'm on vacation.” Kasparas snuggled deeper into his seat and popped one of the candied cherries from his glass into his mouth. “I can't pretend to know what your excuse is. One last fling, perhaps? Sewing oats, or whatever that quaint American saying is.”

“Sowing my wild oats.”

“Exactly.” He leaned across the top of the lounge, his back a pleasing line of soft curves and hidden strength, and pillowed his head on his arms as he looked up at Hannibal. “One last meaningless tumble, and whatever else you got up to these last few days, before hurrying back to wrap yourself once more around Gabriel's finger. Not that long ago, you used to look at me the way you look at him.”

Hannibal smiled and cupped Kasparas' cheek, admiring the sharpness of his jaw and the slope of his neck. “My regard for Gabriel is far beyond my consideration for you. There was never really anything between us beyond the physical or surface. Not really.”

“I would be grabbing that paperweight over there if I didn't know you're being terribly cruel right now for kindness' sake.”

“I don't wish to hurt you more than necessary, Kasparas. I never did.”

“I know, hence me not trying to brain you with a pretentious blob of crystal.” Kasparas sighed and sat up on his knees, trailing his hand along Hannibal's shoulder and collar. He unclasped the top two buttons so he could feel Hannibal's warm collarbone, resting his light touch against his pulse. A pensive look came over him, his brow furrowed, and Hannibal tilted his head in question. “It's so strange, how far we've all come. I was so obsessed with you when we first met.”

“Brilliant boy. One of the youngest doctors to ever be staffed.” Hannibal smiled and settled gentle hands at his waist.

“I am brilliant,” he agreed. “Not enough to break your record, though.”

“Enough to gain my attention—that you practically begged for.” Hannibal took him by his chin to make him meet his stare. “You must know that, that is something you really shouldn't want.”

Kasparas shivered but didn't pull away. “It's crossed my mind.” He ducked his head, shaking it. “Whatever we were, that's over.”

“Yes.”

“Is it strange that I'm happy about that? I keep having this feeling that, had you kept me, I would have given you everything.” He didn't sound pleased at the idea.

“No, it's not strange.” His hand slipped to Kasparas' neck and he couldn't help pressing the slightest bit. “I would have taken much more than that.”

Hannibal tilted Kasparas' head up. He took his time looking over his silky hair and vibrant eyes. He tasted like fresh lemons and whiskey when he kissed him. Sugar from the rim of his glass melted on Hannibal's tongue. He couldn't ask for a more perfect farewell. He stepped away and grabbed his bags.

Before he reached the door, he turned back for the last time. “One day, you will be happy to look back and know how very lucky you are that we did not come to that.”

* * * * *

As Hannibal prepared dinner, he allowed himself to ponder certain details he had pushed aside for the sake of his own sanity. Though biased and slighted against Nigel, the information he obtained from Charlie was invaluable. A priceless look into the life of his lost twin. The shy boy, who once turned from Hannibal because of his violent appetites, remade himself to survive and thrive so far from his home. Dangerous. Powerful. Protective and possessive of the things he loved.

Hannibal wanted to howl at the sky and tear a thousand people apart in his rage and sorrow. To have Nigel—this dark and deadly version—out in the world where they could have been together again was a bittersweet fantasy that clogged his throat and burned his eyes. They could have done so much. The world could have fell to ruins by their whims. For Nigel to be snatched from him by Fate and terrible circumstances was almost too much for Hannibal to bear.

He focused once more on the task at hand. Thoughts of Will, of the future Hannibal wanted to share with him, was a balm to the pain Nigel kept dealing him. Everything was chosen with care. Even the herbs he mixed into the stuffing that would be placed inside Charlie's heart. Fresh and the best quality. Harvested from his own garden. As meaningful as the flowers planned for the dining table. A smile, no longer tinged with sadness, found its place on Hannibal's wine-sweetened lips as he silently recited the recipe's hidden symbols.

Rosemary; to bind two people in a gentle love.

Thyme; a personification of affection.

Oregano; to signify the joy and happiness I wish to bring Will.

Dill; once thought by my pagan ancestors to protect the home and strengthen love that already exists.

Bay leaves; in this instance, embody the glory of love and is said to attract one's soulmate.

He worked diligently, listening for any sign that Will had come out of his room. Since he arrived back at the estate hours ago, the house had been empty save for them. The rest of his family followed in his footsteps and had romantic getaways of their own. Hannibal couldn't say he was sad his ended early, or that he was left alone with Will and Katinka. However, he had yet to see either of them. It made him almost too curious. Had Will cooped himself up all day? Was he still searching the Internet for connections? Alluding those who would capture him? Had he found his enemies first?

Hannibal wished him a successful hunt.

The heart roasted for nearly four hours before Hannibal decided to collect Will. He made a stop in the dining room to throw another log on the fire and build the flames to a cheerful blaze. More snow came in the night to leave Castle Lecter in a seeming isolated bubble of sparkling ice and glittering drifts. Pretty, but detrimental if the proper precautions weren't taken in such an old and potentially drafty structure.

He checked the place settings, straightened the silverware, cursed himself for his nerves.

Everything had to be perfect. *He* wanted to be perfect. For Will. To leave no doubt in Will's mind that Hannibal was the best out of the world to choose from. As Will was for him. It was all terribly frustrating. Will would not be won with his usual tactics. Will would not be blinded. Hannibal did not want him blind. When Will was completely his, it would be with eyes wide open and no more veils between them.

That did not mean Hannibal would grow lax in his efforts to win. He approached the table and admired the centerpiece he chose especially for their dinner. Just for Will. Murasaki would approve. Mischa would tease him. He was grateful neither were around to witness his floundering. Every bloom, every color, the angle of each branch—all planned and executed to make a blaring declaration. One of his favorite ways to communicate. Hiding in plain sight.

Each flower he chose had several, often contradictory, meanings. It always amused him to make such displays when even those fluent in the language of flowers might not understand. This time, it was obvious to him. The sweet scent of the hyacinths was strong enough to fill the room with a pleasant haze of perfume. Now and again, Will's eyes matched the cobalt blue of these particular blooms. *Your loveliness charms me.* Hannibal took great care in clipping the branches of apple blossoms he wove in and around the other flowers. A rustic beauty he hoped reminded Will of his home. *I prefer you before all.*

Hannibal picked up a stray daisy that must have fallen to the white lace table runner when he did some last-minute clipping. He brought the simple, classic flower to his lips and whispered aloud the only meaning he could have chosen. “I love you truly.”

Hannibal traced the delicate petal of the apple blossom with his thumb as he looked over the spread, searching for any imperfections and finding none. Just like the old recipe for the heart he was about to serve his beloved, he didn't need Will to know the meaning behind the flowers or the choice of herbs. Not really. Not yet. In time, Will would understand everything. Hannibal would be there to guide him, teach him. Soon Will would have nothing but clarity, and Hannibal would be beside him through every epiphany.

He took a moment to straighten any wrinkles in his suit and fussed with his hair for only a second before he made his way upstairs. He knocked on Will's door and, after some shuffling about, was greeted by the man himself. It had only been a few days but Hannibal realized how much he missed Will's presence once he laid eyes on him again. The pain from the weekend's many divulgences was still present. It would always remain, in place of Nigel. The sight of Will before him, surprised but pleased to see him, was a comfort Hannibal hadn't counted on but eagerly accepted.

“Good evening.” Never again would Hannibal call him “Gabriel.” Not unless he had to. He felt somewhat childish but he refused just the same. He would have Will or nothing at all.

“Hannibal. I didn't know you got back.”

“A few hours ago. You hadn't come down and I didn't wish to disturb you.”

“Everything all right?” Will stepped out from his doorway so he wouldn't have to whisper.

He was curious about where Hannibal had gone but he wouldn't ask. Will was much too secretive to demand details from someone else, no matter how much he wanted to know. Hannibal's smile grew as he remembered the events of the past few days, of the plans he had for the evening. “Better than, thank you. Where is Katinka?”

“Had her bottle and now she's out cold. I tired her out today.” Will couldn't help smiling whenever he mentioned his daughter.

“Excellent. With her asleep and content, for now, would you join me for dinner?”

Will checked the clock, surprised at the time it read. He agreed quickly and followed Hannibal to the dining room. Hannibal was a little apprehensive to ask if Will had stepped away from the baby, or his computer, long enough to eat something more substantial than the toast he often saw him munching on while he worked. Now that he no longer had a schedule for medicine, and the meals each dose demanded, Hannibal noticed Will's habit of simply forgetting to eat. It was a rather alarming trait he had: the ability to disregard his own health and comfort. Hannibal and his family would just have to look after him more diligently.

He showed Will his seat before going into the kitchen. Ordinarily, a dish such as the one he was arranging on a Gzhel platter would be accompanied by a sauce made from the drippings of the roast and a suitable wine. In this case, red. However, Hannibal couldn't help himself and added another twist of his own design and decided to try his hand at a chocolate gravy. It was a condiment he had never made before, but it was interesting enough—and a piece of Will's past from his years living in the southern United States—that Hannibal simply had to make an attempt.

He was quite pleased with the results.

Will's awestruck appreciation when he set the platter on the table made the effort to acquire such a cut worth it. Hannibal plated a few slices of heart, selecting some of the best portions with overflowing stuffing and dripping with the decadent sauce. Beside the heart he made sure to serve a balanced helping of the roasted carrots, parsnips and turnips.

Hannibal smiled as he placed the heart of the man who threatened Will before him. An offering. A promise. A vow he happily made. “Roasted heart with an herb stuffing, served with seasonal root vegetables and a chocolate gravy.”

“It's almost too beautiful to eat.” Will had yet to tear his eyes away from his plate, even as he picked up his cutlery.

“Nothing is too beautiful to eat.”

Hannibal poured their wine. A deep red vintage full of black raspberries and smoke. It stained Will's lips such a lovely shade. Hannibal had yet to sample the wine or the flesh, instead captivated and sustained by the sight of Will. The meat cut clean and tender and Will made sure to collect some stuffing and gravy before taking a bite. His eyes fluttered closed for a moment as he savored the taste, the flavors melting on his tongue. He licked a smear of chocolate from his bottom lip and smiled as he sipped his wine.

“This is delicious.”

“I'm happy you like it.” They ate in silence for a moment, each focusing on the first substantial meal they'd had for some time. Hannibal stole glances all the while, taking in the relaxed line of Will's shoulders and the gentle humor in his eyes. “You seem different. Less troubled.”

Will looked up from the meat he was cutting into and took his time studying him. Hannibal always felt he was pleasing to the eye, taking care to show the world exactly what he wanted it to see. Tonight he dressed with one goal in mind: to catch Will's eye. He donned his favorite suit and chose his tie with care. His effort in this also seemed to please Will as he admired him and thought over his observation. He only smiled wider, hiding his fragile happiness behind his wine glass.

“I am.”

“Have you heard from friends? Family?”

“I did. A friend. I don't have family.”

Hannibal fought the urge to correct him and instead said, “Family is often what we make of it. It doesn't need to be through blood alone.”

Will shrugged as he took another bite, nodding when Hannibal offered him another serving of heart. “I never wanted to engineer a found family. It's always been a strange concept to me. The closest I came was collecting a group of stray dogs back when I lived in Virginia.”

“A pack of your own, with unconditional love and loyalty. You miss them a great deal.”

“I do. It was easy. An obligation I happily committed to because dogs are simple in their affections and expectations.”

“And now you find yourself on the receiving end of such a situation.” When Will only looked at him, he smiled. “A pack found you, this time.”

“Am I a stray, Hannibal?”

It was a tease. Yet another rhetorical question that often held a trace of flirtation. This time, however, Hannibal didn't deflect or change the subject. They watched each other over the table. The flickering firelight cast Will in a dimming, golden haze and Hannibal found nothing left inside him but the truth he wanted to serve up alongside Charlie's heart. “You are a perceptive, imaginative lone wolf whom would rather hide himself away than be overwhelmed by the mediocrity of mankind.” *Stop hiding from me.*

But Will wasn't ready, for Hannibal's honesty or to stop running from any perceived threat. He looked away from him to toy with his knife. “It's so much easier on the outskirts than bogged down by the chaotic mess of the middle.”

“Do you still believe that?”

“I *need* to keep believing that.”

“Even with Katinka in your life?” It was a cheap shot, but Hannibal wasn't above fighting dirty. He would use everything he could to entice Will to remain with them, with him. Even the love Will had for Katinka. He went to fetch another bottle of wine and when he returned, he couldn't help placing his hand on Will's shoulder as he refreshed his glass. He kept his

touch comforting and he smiled when Will leaned into it briefly. “One day, you'll accept yourself and your place here. We'll be waiting all the while.”

* * * * *

It was late by the time Hannibal made his way up to his room. He bid Will a good night and wished him pleasant dreams, tamping down on the almost irresistible urge to chase the blushing young man who smiled so sweetly at him before closing his door. Hannibal smiled as he removed his cuff links and replayed every detail of the evening.

It all could not have gone more perfectly.

Even now, Will seemed to sense the danger Hannibal could pose to him. And yet, he did not shy away. In fact, Will only drew nearer with every moment they spent together. It made Hannibal wonder. With all Will's gifts of insight, what did he see when he looked at Hannibal? All the little hints he kept giving Will—he had to know, or at least suspect. It brought a smile to his face and a flutter to his heart to think Will was ever closer to figuring him out. Just as Hannibal was solving the puzzle of Will Graham. Would he try to run once he finished their game, or would he join Hannibal at his table, willingly and eager to feast?

A man as capable of the terrible things Will committed would surely look into Hannibal's soul and only see their reflection. The thought brought with it a sense of longing Hannibal had never felt before.

Before retiring to bed, Hannibal snatched up the phone on his dresser on the way by. Such an unassuming little thing. Capable of ruin and terror. Hannibal flipped it open and looked at the history. Only one conversation. Only one contact saved. He tossed the phone onto his nightstand to grab his own. The number was dialed from memory and the voice that answered belonged to someone he hadn't heard from in years.

“Hello, Girdas. I have a job for you.”

Chapter End Notes

If you ever wondered how Hannibal got so much evil!genius plotting done--his money doesn't hurt, but it's also his never ending supply of contacts. :)

I warned before, once Hannibal admitted to his feelings, he would be having some ridiculously fluffy thoughts about Will. In his dark, obsessive kind of way. :) And as a further warning: he's just going to get gooier and gooier. :P

Hope anyone who passed by liked this latest installment. See you next Thursday! Stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! Sorry for the delay. I had a bit of an unintentional hiatus. First, the holidays were crazy and I was far, far away from my computer for most of it. Second, I got an intense sore throat for a week. Couldn't swallow, could barely eat--I was exhausted and not having the most fun during that time. Finally, my country was just put through some terrible events and if I wasn't glued to the news, I was looking up news. It's been a weird few weeks, is all I'm saying.
>
> I hope everyone has had a safe and happy couple of weeks since last we spoke. :) I think you'll like this chapter. Another turning point, if you will. Before I let you get to it, I want to thank Stralovat, snacktopus and MektiKwiiger for taking the time to leave me comments last chapter. You're lovely and thoughtful and always kind and I appreciate you! :D
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten

“Are you certain about this?” Hannibal was trying his very best to mask his anxiety, his doubt. Evidently, he hadn't completely succeeded.

“Yes. I told you, it's going to be fine. Just get over here, already.” Will rolled his eyes at him but he was still smiling, not at all nervous as Hannibal.

Hannibal came a step closer but found himself hesitating once more, cradling Katinka tighter. “You're sure they're both at an appropriate age for this?”

“I wouldn't have got her in the first place if I wasn't absolutely certain. We'll both be right here the whole time. I won't let go of her, I promise.” Will's smile turned a sweet, coaxing thing. “Don't you trust me, Hannibal?”

“As much as you trust me.”

Hannibal came to join Will. They were in Katinka's room, Will in rare form as he sat lotus-style on the floor. Relaxed and carefree. He made a place for Hannibal to lower down beside him so he crouched there on the balls of his feet, ready to pull Katinka away if need be. Will looked at him as if he was being ridiculous but he didn't say anything, for which Hannibal was grateful. Hannibal took a deep breath before turning Katinka away from the safety of his chest. She stilled, mesmerized, as she took in the sight of the creature held in her father's lap.

Will scooched closer, eyes only for the baby in Hannibal's arms, and gently lifted the puppy for Katinka to see better. “What is this, Tink? What do I got?”

When Katinka only watched, no burbling sounds of pleasure or fear, and remained as unmoving as a porcelain doll, Hannibal reached out to pet the Bernese Mountain puppy on her head. Katinka watched his hand, then looked up to him with blue eyes wide and curious. She only giggled when he smiled down at her, all the while caressing the puppy's velvet ear.

“Mira,” Hannibal said the dog's name to Katinka, repeating it when she looked again at the ball of fluff in Will's firm hold.

Will murmured soft encouragements to Hannibal, leaning closer as he did, so Hannibal took Katinka's hand and placed it on the plush black fur of Mira's shoulder. Mira turned her head and gave Katinka a curious sniff before licking the baby's arm. Finally, Katinka reacted how Hannibal anticipated since Will first came to him with the desire to introduce the two: ecstatic joy and flailing arms that he kept from smacking the puppy in the face. She squealed in delight when she pushed her fingers through Mira's shining coat. Softer than any stuffed toy could ever hope to be.

Hannibal pulled Katinka back before her excitement could overwhelm either baby. He and Will laughed at their interaction—Mira trying to get another good lick in and Katinka shrieking with giggles whenever they managed to land. He took a moment to admire the tiny beast. A pretty girl who would grow into a majestic guardian.

“I must concede, again,” Hannibal said as Will let Katinka feel Mira's paws, “Mira will be an excellent friend for Katinka.”

“You don't have to sound so surprised. I know what I'm doing when it comes to dogs.”

“I know. I will always defer to you, whenever the matter of your pack is concerned.”

“*Our* pack. I would never have brought Mira into your home without asking first.”

“Robertus is very fond of dogs, as well. None of us have the time to properly see to such an animal. I'm sure he was happy to hear your request.”

“He won't have to do much. I'll take care of her.”

“So she, in turn, can take care of Katinka. A fine companion she'll make.” Hannibal scratched under Mira's chin and smiled as the puppy leaned into his touch, practically resting her head in his palm. He looked over her silky coat and trimmed nails. When he first entered Will's rooms, he noticed the cushion by the fire and another set out of the way in Katinka's room. A few toys were left out for Mira. In the corner was a basket of grooming supplies. “It looks like you have everything she needs.”

Will nodded, keeping his eyes on Katinka and Mira's interactions. “And her first set of shots are all taken care of.”

“You are a remarkable caregiver to the things you love. Katinka and Mira want for nothing.” They stood after Will let Mira escape his hold to tackle a piece of rope she seemed rather fond of. Will took Katinka from him, kissing and play-biting the baby's chubby neck as he brought her to the crib. Hannibal watched him, taking in his scruffy cheeks, the curls that were long enough now to get in eyes darkened by the growing circles beneath them. Dressed once again in a dark gray, long-sleeved thermal shirt. Already worn and stretched from all the times Will chose it over what could be found in his closet or armoire. Rarely did he wear anything he did not buy for himself, the small selection that it was. Hannibal decided it was time for another poke, a gentle prod at his little stowaway. “If only you would show the same care and doting to yourself.”

Will sighed as he kept Katinka from worming her way out of her blanket to roll on her back. “Aren't you tired of having this conversation yet?”

“No.” Over the time of knowing him, Hannibal had become immune to Will's glares. Including the extremely potent one he sent him over his shoulder. “Perhaps, it's the way you needlessly neglect yourself that keeps me returning to it.”

Will chuckled and shook his head as he let Katinka have her way and grab at his hand. “Jesus, Hannibal. I'm not *neglecting* myself. Just 'cause I'm not buying a new wardrobe every week or a Maserati doesn't mean I'm going without.” He grew quiet for a moment, petting gentle fingers through Katinka's hair. “Money doesn't make everything better again.”

“It certainly helps. While it won't solve your problems, it can make your life easier. Whatever is troubling you—and I know it's more than your grief for Nigel, even if you won't tell me—your burdens need not be so heavy. With the family you have, and our resources at your disposal, every one of your needs could be met instantly. I suppose I just don't understand why you won't take advantage.”

“I don't *need* anything.”

What a lie that was. Will was only deceiving himself, not Hannibal, so he forgave such a blatant untruth. Every problem Will Graham had wouldn't disappear with money alone, but it would ease the way to solving them permanently. He had vast resources to deal with Freddie Lounds. How quickly the tables could turn on Mason Verger with just a few phone calls and a couple discreet transactions. Everything had a price to the right person and if Will wished it so, he could have both pests hand-delivered to him in a matter of days. Or he could use that same money to hide once again to never be found. Even Hannibal could lose his scent with the right amount of funding erasing his tracks.

Yet, Will remained. Not running, not acting, only waiting. It didn't escape his notice the disdain Will had for his new found wealth. He refused to touch it. In fact, Hannibal would say Will always seemed sickened by the idea of utilizing the latest tool at his disposal. Just how Hannibal expected he would react. What he knew of him, what he read of the man—Will Graham wouldn't be rid of these nuisances with such detachment. No, he would want them close. By his own doing. While Hannibal admired his dedication and work ethic, he wished Will realized he didn't have to do it all alone. If it was blood he wanted, proof of life slipping away from his prey, Hannibal would happily lend himself and all that he had to Will's

disposal. He could hardly stand to see Will torture himself so needlessly over moral dilemmas that simply didn't exist.

Hannibal slipped silently across the room as Will settled Katinka for a nap. Will stilled, hands frozen over Katinka's blanket, when Hannibal came to his side. He boxed Will in with his arms to either side of him, hands gripping the sturdy, polished wood of the rail. When Will didn't step away, continued on to fuss with Katinka's lamb, Hannibal smiled and slid one hand closer to Will's waist while he reached with the other to pull Katinka's blanket higher over her shoulders.

“It's not about what you need, but what you want. It isn't bad to want things. All you have to do is ask, and we'll help with whatever you want. Whatever it is, I'll make it happen.” Hannibal lifted his hand from Katinka to settle on Will's exposed forearm and gave him a comforting squeeze. “Try to rest, as well. Your nightmares and insomnia seem to be increasing in frequency.”

Before Will could argue or make any kind of denial, Hannibal stepped away and towards the door. He made the sound he often heard Will use on Mira in the last week since he brought her home and she dropped her toy to follow. Hopefully, with Hannibal watching after Mira, Will would try to steal an hour or so of sleep before Katinka demanded his attention once more.

* * * * *

In the past, mere months before, Hannibal enjoyed the time on his own as much as the hours spent in the company of acquaintances and colleagues. Adaptable enough that no matter how the days found him, he was never lonely. If he wasn't appreciating the company of others, he always found some way to amuse himself. Even if just sitting in contemplation, there was much to find in the quiet.

Everything had changed without him realizing it. He doubted he could have stopped it had he tried. The novelty of the newness of such an experience was enough to intrigue and entertain him. Hannibal was surrounded by everything that held his interest, cocooned in the warmth of his family he hadn't lived with since he was a boy, yet he found himself restless. Bored. Lonely.

All because Will Graham had shut himself away and Hannibal had only caught fleeting glances of the man for a day and a half.

Hannibal tried once more to focus on his book as he relaxed the late afternoon away on the settee in his room before a lightly flickering fire. He couldn't bring himself to admit defeat after he stared at one paragraph for a few minutes. Despite his determination, all of his thoughts and concentration kept floating back to the man hiding away down the hall from him. As worried as he was, he couldn't help the slight amusement he felt nor the smile that teased at the corner of his mouth. The description he gave to Will proved to be accurate. A lone wolf. Purposely keeping away from others.

What little focus he had scattered like dust when his door open and closed and a familiar sound of footsteps echoed through his room until his guest stood before him. He smiled and

gladly set his book aside. “Hello, Mischa. How are you?”

“I'm fine, thank you for asking.” Mischa took a few more steps towards him but didn't move to sit. Her arms came to cross over her ribs, golden eyes piercing as she took him in. “I just returned Katinka to her father, after seeing to her for the morning until her nap. Murasaki or I will collect her once again until bedtime. In case you are interested.”

Hannibal realized the upset coming from her was for him, *because* of him. It was such a rare occurrence that Hannibal almost laughed. However, he valued his body and his possessions so dared not even smile at his sister. “You are angry with me.”

“Yes, I am.”

He couldn't completely mask his pleasant surprise and tried to placate her before she picked up anything to throw at him. “I've been here most of the day, dearest. Will you at least give me a hint for what I have done?”

“Always making a game of things.” Her anger drained away and Mischa sighed and shook her head. “I want you to do something about Will.”

“What is it you would have me do?”

“Anything. Don't tell me you haven't noticed the change in him over the past few days. He's so withdrawn, sad. He let's us take Katinka during the day while he stays in his room. He hardly speaks. He eats like a bird.”

“Of course I've noticed. There is little I can do, at the moment.” Hannibal straightened in his seat and folded his hands in his lap as he watched Mischa begin to pace. “You have to understand—all of you have to understand: Will is not simply dealing with trauma from the accident, the depression that is common after such an ordeal, but beneath all of that he also has what he lives with on a normal basis. His mind is such an incredible thing, but it comes with a price. In my unofficial professional opinion, I would say Will has an overabundance of empathy. He feels everything acutely all the time, and when he can't, his imagination makes up for it. It's an uncomfortable, remarkable, set of gifts that leave him very vulnerable. I'm sure he just needs some time alone to separate himself from everything he picks up from us.”

Mischa didn't look convinced. Hannibal had always loved her kind heart, her desire to help others. “I just thought you could do something, since the two of you have grown so close.”

“That's part of the problem. Will feels guilt over the pleasure he takes in my company, in the solace he takes from us. Until he is ready to trust me, to let me in, he'll continue with his farce and suffer all the while for it.”

Mischa made a frustrated noise and rubbed at her temple. “Can we not just tell him we know? I hate lying, especially to Will.”

Hannibal chuckled and settled back into the cushions. “You lie for me all the time.”

“That's different.” Finally, Mischa came to sit beside him, laying down to rest her head on his lap. She took up his hand to cradle in her hold. “I lie to protect you.”

“That is precisely what we are doing for Will.”

Mischa turned to look at him with such sad, trusting eyes. She reached up to play with a loose lock of his hair. “Won't you do anything to help him, Hannibal?”

“I am. We are. We all can only be ready and waiting for when Will needs us.” He took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Trust me as you have countless times before and know that what I am doing is for the best.”

“Always.”

“Good.” Hannibal took up his book. “Shall I read aloud?”

“Please. Today is far too gray and cold to be anywhere but here, while you recite ancient poems.” Mischa grabbed the blanket from the back of the lounge and snuggled close.

She was asleep before the end of the canto.

* * * * *

It was the morning of the third day without more than a scant sighting of Will that Hannibal considered he might have to rethink his handling of the situation.

Since the night of Hannibal's declaration, the time they shared over a heart roasted to perfection, Will locked himself away from his family. From Hannibal. Will functioned for Katinka but Hannibal knew he was hanging by already frayed threads. Will's guilt and fear exacerbated his delicate frame of mind and he was too used to being alone to trust them with his mounting problems. Ordinarily, Hannibal would applaud Will's ability to layer one falsehood upon another. To maintain such secrets for so long in the situation he was in spoke of a fortitude Hannibal rarely saw.

Now he could only muster a brittle appreciation in the face of his frustration.

Never had he felt so thwarted, as if bound by invisible ties that had no give regardless of how he struggled. Everything was made all the worse because the struggle was not his own, the fight not his. No matter the desire to take it upon himself. Hannibal would do anything to alleviate Will's stress, his pain, but he was forced into inaction.

If Will would just come to him. One word from him. A request. A demand. An order. Will had but to ask and Hannibal would help him. Whatever he wished, it would be done. Surely he knew that by now? Had Hannibal not shown him he could be trusted with his secrets, his troubles, his fears and his doubts? Apparently, no. This would not deter him. Hannibal would just work that much harder to make Will see.

Hannibal couldn't help his growl of pain as he was hit in the side, curling in on himself on instinct. A careless, foolish mistake. That round was a loss and the next was over just as

quickly when the blunt end of Murasaki's shinai stopped just short of making contact with his cheek. He didn't flinch as their eyes met and Murasaki retreated two steps back into position.

“Concentrate, Hannibal, or I will spoil your beauty for a few weeks. At least.”

He murmured a quiet apology to his aunt while she took a moment to look him over, shinai lowered in a resting position. Snowflakes matted their hair and left a light dusting on their kendogi. All around them the fresh and once-pristine snow was now marked with the trails of their morning kendo sparring. Yet he didn't feel the cold. His blood felt on fire and he almost expected to see steam rising from his damp robes.

“Your head and your heart are not where they need to be.”

As her chastising left him feeling as he did when he was a boy, she rushed him with weapon raised. Hannibal lost another round. And another and another. Murasaki grew tired of the easy fight and made quick work of disarming him. She threw her shinai aside as well in favor of punching him in the solar plexus. Hannibal stumbled back but quickly regained his footing, blocking her next jab. He pushed his pain aside. All of his thoughts and worries faded as he fell into the dance of combat. And in his release he found his focus. Every bruise, every strain of muscle, helped blow the fog from his mind.

Clarity was just out of his bloodied-knuckle reach.

Their invigorating session ended when Murasaki grappled him by the throat, his back against the frozen ground. She helped him up, touch now gentle and soothing as she brushed clumps of snow off him and out of his hair. “You are used to violence as your method, but there are other ways.” Murasaki pulled his head down to rest their foreheads together and she smiled. “There are softer ways to influence someone. You can be soft, Hannibal. Show Will you can be soft.”

Hannibal chuckled and nodded his agreement. Of course she knew. Of course she knew what to do. They grabbed up their gear, parting after plans for breakfast were made. It was still very early. By the time he cleaned up and readied for the day, the rest of their family would be crawling out of their warm beds. Maybe. Hannibal didn't mind if he had to set back his schedule if they slept late. He didn't mind anything. By their session's end, his spirits were rather higher than when it began.

Hannibal was bruised, winded and had a lingering pain in his side, but he now had an idea on how to approach his skittish, despondent little wolf.

* * * * *

If Hannibal didn't love Will as much as he did, he would be tempted to study him. To put Will in any and every situation he could think of, or was presented with, just to see what he would do—it was a path he might have chosen in another life. For now, Hannibal only wished to rid him of his troubles. The sympathy he felt was yet another novel feeling. Never had he felt this for anyone outside his family. No one had ever been worthy of such consideration.

Hannibal couldn't say he enjoyed such a brand of compassion. Will's unnecessary suffering wasn't easy to watch, but it had to happen this way. For now. The man's empathy, his unlimited imagination, were rare and amazing. The things he must feel. Constantly. Much like Hannibal's own talents, though it seemed Will never learned to control his—to keep the double-pointed edges of his empathy from stabbing into himself. He could see how easily overwhelming it could be. Frightening. An incredible gift. One that left Will susceptible to things like depression.

Hannibal could and would protect Will from many things, but he couldn't shield him from himself.

He could, however, lighten his burdens in every way available to him. Even the simplest gestures could carry great weight. With Murasaki's words echoing through his mind for the rest of the day, Hannibal took extra note of Will's comings and goings. He had been alone in his room most of the day, once again. Only becoming active when Katinka needed him. It was safe to assume he still wasn't sleeping. His appetite was almost non-existent.

With that in mind, Hannibal took a portion of the evening to make Will something easy on the stomach and soothing for sleep. He took one of his favorite teas and set about brewing a cup. Earl Grey was usually an energizing blend of leaves and flowers, the complex flavor emboldened even further by bergamot. This particular decaffeinated blend would taste just as luxurious but not keep his intended up all night.

As the tea brewed, Hannibal heated milk with honey and lavender. While it simmered, he couldn't help himself and stepped out to check on any late bloomers in one of the smaller greenhouses kept closer to the estate. As he turned down another row of herbs and seasonal plants, his eye caught a flash of color. He came to stand before the plant and looked over the sparse flowers. It was far past its blossoming time, clinging to spring-time desires inside the warm protection of the glass house even as autumn snow fell outside.

He found a well-formed bud amongst the scraggly bunch and couldn't help smiling as he trailed a finger along the soft petals of the fierce little survivor. Hannibal snipped the bright yellow buttercup and brought it to his nose. Nothing to irritate the senses, just the scent of fresh life and rich earth. The petals were like fragile gossamer against his lips. Fitting for the radiant boy hiding in the dark from him.

Hannibal returned just as the milk was at the desired temperature and the burbling tea gave off a fragrance of citrus and vanilla. The steamed milk was added, with a few more buds of lavender sprinkled on top of the foam, before the tea was ready. He carried the cup, with the flower tucked carefully on the saucer, up the stairs of the darkened castle not long after the large clock down the hall struck half-past midnight.

Will had yet to go to bed. He would hear Hannibal's knock, however faint it was. The tea would be waiting for him, but Hannibal would not be there to see him take it. The point was not to receive recognition or thanks or to take any of the man's time. For Will to know he was thought of, he was seen and cared for. That was enough for Hannibal.

After retiring to his own room he found sleep evasive, as well. Whatever troubles plagued Will, Hannibal's own maudlin thoughts scratched at the locked and barricaded doors of his

memory palace. Attempting escape from the decrepit places he would not venture into. To keep hungry, desperate shadows at bay, Hannibal thought it wise not to chase rest just yet. Instead, he took up pencil and paper, charcoal and pastels.

The past was unwilling to be ignored this night. Scenes from his childhood immediately took form beneath sharpened points of graphite. People and places long gone. His mother's cherry trees. The hunting dogs his father often took on long trips into the forests surrounding their home. A view in summer from the broken window in their attic. Safe memories that slowly brought to mind more painful recollections.

They hurt for their simplicity. Their sweetness. A shade of himself Hannibal never tried to regain the moment he lost it.

Nigel sat across from him. Had been there a good while. He peeked now and again at the figures emerging onto each page. One sketch in particular caught his interest and Nigel lingered over Hannibal's shoulder as each stroke of the pencil brought the image in his mind to sharp relief. The three of them. Children. Sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks and care-free smiles.

“Were we ever that happy?”

“Once,” Hannibal answered as he touched up the ringlets of Mischa's hair. “A long time ago.”

“A lifetime ago.” Nigel flopped back down into his chair with a grace he never had to try hard to execute. “I don't think that boy ever existed. If he did, he died that day in the barn.”

Hannibal scoffed as he carefully brushed charcoal dust from the page. “Don't be ridiculous. I pulled you back. Through blood and frozen wasting.” He could feel Nigel studying him and ignored the amused scrutiny to focus on baby-fat faces and knobby knees.

“I wonder...Are you more sad that you didn't get to eat me over the fact that I'm dead?”

Hannibal paused in his work to give the question serious thought, looking over the image of Nigel his mind chose to conjure. “Perhaps. It stings, that you were stolen from me. That I couldn't protect you.”

“That was never your job.”

“It was the only job I ever had. My charges. Nigel and Mischa. Parts of myself outside of my body.”

“I don't need your fucking chivalry now, and I didn't then. I got on just fine all these years without your pampering.” Nigel leaned forward, face illuminated by the blazing fire. “Tell me, knowing what you know now: would you have eaten me, instead of those fuckers?”

“If I did, I would have honored you. Took you into me, kept with me forever. Nothing like how I treated those animals.” Hannibal put his sketchpad aside. “I don't think I would have, even knowing what awaited you. You seemed to thrive, come into yourself. You fell in love, had a family. Without you, there would be no Katinka.”

Nigel smiled and came to him, so close Hannibal could almost feel the heat radiating from him. His hand came down on the armrest near Hannibal's elbow but they didn't touch. “*She's* the piece of me you get to keep with you forever, Han. Treasure her.” A wicked smirk curled his lips as he looked into Hannibal's guarded eyes. “Treasure them both. Move on. Let me go.” Playfulness turned to pleading.

“I can't.” Thinking of those who might be responsible for Nigel's death made rage pulse bright and boiling through his entire being. Hannibal forced his hands to relax on his lap before he gave into the urge to tear his room apart. “Not yet.”

Nigel sighed, disappointed and frustrated, and turned away from him. As he faded into the shadows, Hannibal heard his biting parting words with ringing clarity. “So fucking stubborn.”

The sentiment stayed in Hannibal's thoughts long after Nigel left him for the night. It echoed still as he heard his door creak open further and soft footsteps sounded across polished wood and thick rugs. If he were deaf and blind, stripped of all basic senses, he would know who found their way to his personal domain. Still, it was a comfort to hear Will's familiar gait and catch his scent, warm and sleepy and muted as it was.

Will was quiet as he stood beside him, taking in the spill of images on loose sketches. Long seconds spent looking over each and Hannibal wondered what Will gleaned from them. What did he pick up on, when he gazed down at frozen smiles and laughing faces made silent? Just like that, Will pulled Hannibal from his deep wanderings in halls long abandoned. Hannibal came back to himself and blinked once from his staring contest with the flames at his hearth.

A sudden urge to know came upon him, in Will's own words. “Was Nigel happy?”

“I think so.” Will was quiet for a moment. Not in panic, buying time to come up with pretty lies, but in consideration of the version of the man Hannibal would never have the pleasure of knowing. “He owned several nightclubs and invested in other side-projects. Had expensive tastes that he also lavished on those he loved. He was devoted to his family.”

“Did you know Nigel made his way completely on his own? Independent from his family's wealth and connections.”

“No, but that doesn't surprise me. Nigel didn't talk much about his family. Hardly spoke your names.”

“It was my fault.” Whatever Will knew, or suspected, Hannibal needed him to understand this for a fact. Did Nigel share this with him? Did he tell Will all about his overbearing, *monstrous* brother who he fled all those years ago? “Some things Nigel could never forgive me for.”

“What could he possibly turn his back on his twin for?”

It wasn't empty sentiment, coaxing words off a sweet tongue with no clue of the answers Hannibal could give. There would be no judgment from Will, not with the skeletons hanging in his own closet. Curious, wondrous boy. He would give Will what he wanted. A juicy tidbit to sate his appetite. Finally, the wolf would begin to see whose den he sought shelter in.

“Shortly before our parents died, my father made arrangements for us to come live with my uncle. But the year we were thirteen and Mischa was eight, was a harsh year even without the loss of Mother and Father. That winter was brutal—as unforgiving and dangerous as the political landscape.”

“Russia still occupied the country then?”

“Yes. Looming over everything with their forbidding shadow. But that didn't matter to us. We had other concerns. Food was running out and the roads were impassable. Robertus was unable to take us away from our crumbling home. Forced to wait until the thaw.” Hannibal could feel the cold of those terrible days, the hunger and despair. And yet, the three children in his memory learned such suffering was not the worst they could and would endure. “I remember coming into the barn, one bitterly cold day, to fetch Nigel and Mischa. I had found some things in the cellar to boil with snow to make a meager stew for us. There were unfamiliar voices within. Three men, yelling in Russian. Stragglers. Worthless fringe from a Russian battalion who lost their way in the recent blizzard. They hurt my sister, my brother. I thought I lost them. For a moment, I thought I was left alone. The only things I ever loved ripped from me.”

Exquisite Will listened avidly to his story, heard the words he didn't say. “Did you kill them?”

“Those animals were treated accordingly. Mischa was traumatized for a long time after. She remembers nothing of what happened, and I am grateful every day for that small mercy. I nursed them both back to health. Cared for them. Brought them back to me. However I could. But Nigel knew what I did. The price I gladly paid to keep them both alive. He distanced himself from me. Once he was able, when we turned eighteen and graduated from academy, Nigel left his family behind. Left me behind. I could never get Nigel to understand. And now I never will.”

No shock. No disgust. No meaningless platitudes of right and wrong, good and evil. Hannibal gave him only the truth, as harsh and brutal as it was. In turn, Will gave him a gift.

“I think he did. You said yourself, he gained everything on his own. Everything he had was from his own cunning and ability. He was a powerful man in a city like Bucharest. Nigel wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Wasn't afraid to do everything he could to protect those he loved. And Nigel *was* coming back to you, Hannibal. He was.”

Will put his hand over Hannibal's and he turned in his grasp so their fingers tangled together. He seemed to hesitate, wanting to say something else, and Hannibal could do nothing but smile and show Will he would only find encouragement and acceptance from him. How could he not? He squeezed Will's captive hand and the touch seemed to steady his shying resolve. Quiet words. Secret words. Never dared uttered but thought often. Hushed though they were, that didn't stop the passion from bleeding into them, the absolute belief in them.

“There are a lot of people in this world who deserve to be somebody's bacon. I would rather Mischa and Nigel—for however many extra years he was given—be alive instead of those pigs."

It was as if Will spoke words etched on Hannibal's soul. Was that not what he tried to get Nigel to understand just a handful of minutes prior to this astounding encounter? To hear it from Will was almost his undoing. He didn't realize he was crying until he felt Will wipe away his tears with gentle touches. Hannibal had to close his eyes from the sight, hold tight the control he prided himself in having.

Will knew. He had to. Such simple phrasing yet his words held weight few understood. Subconsciously or not, he *had* to know. Connections came fast for him. Even early on, Hannibal could see how fast Will pieced things together, plucking clues and details seemingly right out of the ether. How much longer would it be before he figured everything out? Thinking on it tested Hannibal's patience in all the best ways.

Too soon Will pulled back, disappearing once again into the safety of his room. Always running. The first to retreat and give ground. Hannibal allowed it. For now. But as he replayed their conversation over and over, he knew those tactics would have to end soon. Warmth from Will's touch had yet to dissipate from his cheek, the callouses on his hands still a vivid sensation. Hannibal could feel pressure building in his chest and delighted in the ache of it.

Soon Will would run from him and Hannibal would give chase.

Chapter End Notes

The point of this chapter isn't filler but to show what Hannibal and the Lecters were doing around this time in Mr. Lecter. I wanted to show further interaction between them all and Hannibal's growing feelings. I hope it didn't feel like unnecessary fluff and that you all enjoyed it. This is supposed to be Hannibal's side of a rom-com though. A little fluff is to be expected. And I don't know about you all, but I could use some sweetness right now.

I hope everyone is staying safe, sane and happy through all this. See you Thursday!

~CReed

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! The delay is completely my fault this time. I'll own it. :) I had so much troubled with this chapter. I didn't feel right releasing it into the wild last week, hoping I'd be able to figure out my problem before this Thursday. Unfortunately, I'm still not thrilled with this. Before I let you go, I just want to thank Stralovat, Jor_ishere, Ruthless330 and Imanerdandliketoread for taking the time to leave me comments last chapter. They're always so lovely to read and I appreciate hearing what you think. You all are very kind and wonderful! :D
>
> Please enjoy the chapter, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven

Hannibal was capable of feeling many things—multiple things at once. Long ago he made peace with his ability, or inability, as it were. Even before that fateful day at his parents' home. There were just some things Hannibal was born feeling, or not. He never held too much of a capacity for sympathy or mercy. Really, the only people who inspired such in him were his family. He never questioned it. He kept it under iron-clad control. Never had he chose to indulge in the urges he was born with.

Not until three deplorable swine forced his hand. What he did to them was crude and unversed compared to what he would later accomplish, but the experience had its merit. Stepping stones to what would come. In a way, they helped as equally as they harmed. If not for them, who could say what kind of life he would have lived? A shade going through the motions of a mediocre half-life.

His life without a monumental Becoming. If not for them, he wouldn't feel in the capacity he was capable. It would all be so muted. Dulled. Misplaced or wasted.

Hannibal guessed what would be normal to feel at the moment was anger. Fear? A hot-headed rage that could cause him to make mistakes? He felt nothing like that. He felt nothing at all. As he read over what Girdas and their associates found for him, all he felt was a void. Potential for feeling. He kept himself carefully blank. A cold vacuum. Now was not the time for feeling. It was the time to study his enemy. Hannibal dissected every fact and detail on the gleaming screen of his tablet.

He had finally found the piece he was missing. The detail that never made Will's guilt sit right. The connection between the likes of Dr. Balkus and the obscure American technology company that gave out such generous donations. The very same company owned by a man

who paid handsomely for Will Graham to be apprehended with any force necessary in Romania. A mangled pig Hannibal had seen before. Mason Verger was one of those interesting specimens who were only interesting due to their degree of repulsiveness—and that was before Will's beautiful attack. Looking at Will's work made Hannibal want to build on it, perfect and finish what was started.

Fussy whimpers took his attention from the plans that were beginning to take shape in his mind. Hannibal put his tablet away and gathered Katinka up from her short nap. He frowned as he smoothed her tangled curls back from her flushed face. She slept very little. Nowhere near long enough to ease her temper. She pushed his fretting touches away even as she lay her head against his shoulder. Hannibal sighed and patted her back. He couldn't fault her for her restlessness. They had a long day.

Will left. Before the sun rose. Before Hannibal woke. Hannibal kissed Katinka's head and marveled at the scope of emotions Will forced onto him. He wasn't angry. Frustrated, yes. That lonely place between sad and worried was where Hannibal lingered most. Will sent Robertus a text, asking them to look after Katinka. Just until he finished running errands, clearing his head. He planned to return. Will was coming back to him, to Katinka. It was the only thing that kept Hannibal from going after him, collecting him. Still, that didn't keep his fear at bay.

The thought of possible danger, of the people out there who wished Will the same kind of harm that befell Nigel and Gabi, made Hannibal prowl with the need to hunt. He felt it building, energy he couldn't expend against threats he couldn't fight. Only gone for a day and Hannibal was filled with an ache he couldn't describe. The need to have Will in his sights threatened to consume him.

He learned quickly that if he wanted to escape this ordeal with his sanity intact, he was going to have to distract not only himself but Katinka as well.

Together, they succeeded in staying busy.

For such a young child, she was very active and expressive. Part of the day, after Robertus finally handed her over, was spent giving her an examination that was long overdue. His background wasn't in pediatrics, but it wasn't difficult to look over her old records and compare them to where she was currently in growth and reaction to stimuli. His attempt at child medicine wasn't bad at all, he was happy to find.

Katinka hated every moment of it.

In between naps and feeding, changing and rocking, Hannibal took Katinka's mind off missing her father with any and all amusements he could think of. They played and cuddled, Hannibal needing the comfort as much as her. Several items he ordered for her arrived with perfect timing. A preemptive fashion show took up a large portion of the afternoon. Katinka was adorable in every new dress and outfit he had painstakingly chose for her. She hated her new playpen that he stubbornly assembled and reassembled after another round of playing and a walk outside. She loved his singing, especially one song in particular.

Once he shoved aside his worries, locked them away in the depths of his mind before any kind of panic could take hold of him, Hannibal enjoyed himself. Caring for Katinka and the playful little beast, Mira, proved to be as fulfilling as any other hobby he had. The puppy was already so impeccably trained. Throughout the day, she let him know when it was time for food and water and when she needed outside. It couldn't be denied that Will had a gift with animals and as the day dragged on, he grew more grateful for it.

One more time, Mira played in the gathering dusk until exhaustion took her. She slept by his hearth after Hannibal donated one of his cushions to her. Katinka, blissfully without fuss this time, was slowly winding down herself. He smiled as he walked her across his room when he noticed the attention she gave the soft texture of his silver shirt, mesmerized by the subtle gleam of thread work.

“Already you are showing such a promising sense of taste, my darling.”

He kissed her head, gentled her as she put up a feeble resistance to falling asleep. He started singing Silk Tassels. An old song. One he remembered from childhood. Just like every other time he sang, Katinka grew limp against his shoulder, soothed but not sleeping. Stubborn girl. Perhaps she was waiting for her father to return before she let that final wall of her guard down.

Hannibal went to the window and looked to the darkening sky. Did Will's business last so long? How far away did he wander? Was he careful in covering his tracks? Would Will say goodbye, before fading from their lives? Had someone finally caught Will and kept him from returning? Though he did his best to keep his fears and doubts buried, they clawed their way to the forefront of his mind. One more alarmed than the last.

Hannibal was mid-verse when something caught his attention. Sharp. Familiar and warm and terribly missed. He stopped singing and breathed in the scent, marking the new notes layered on top with curiosity. When he turned, relief rushed through him at the sight that met him. Standing in his doorway, taking in the image Hannibal and Katinka made with a tired, breathtaking, smile was Will. He came back.

Actual and whole. Happy to see him. His movements were easy and light, as if his burdens no longer threatened to crush him. Will's happiness bled into Hannibal, magnifying his own. He came further into Hannibal's room, smile widening when he took in Katinka's new dress and the playpen abandoned nearby. “Someone's had a productive day.”

Hannibal couldn't help sighing, but his smile was genuine as he cuddled Katinka. “Quite. It took more time than I would have liked putting together, but it won't collapse and gives Katinka a change of scenery.”

“Does she like it?”

“Not at all.”

Will laughed and came close to caress the back of Katinka's neck, giving her a comforting squeeze. “It was a good thought. I'm sure there are many more things you have found to lavish Bell with. Something's bound to stick. Try the box it came in.”

“Bell?” That was new. It gave Hannibal more pause than it should have, thinking over the odd choice in names Will insisted on in place of her real one. He could only recall a handful of times Will managed to use it.

“Her nickname. You know: Katinka. Tink. Tinker Bell. Bell. It's an evolution, of sorts.”

Will was so adamant, so serious about something so ridiculous, that Hannibal couldn't help the laugh that was shocked out of him. Will was utterly ridiculous. It shouldn't be charming. His sentimentality shouldn't be endearing. His delight in what Hannibal would have once classified as trivial should not be compelling. When it came to Will, nothing was trivial. It was captivating and lovely and Hannibal had been so worried. He could kill him for making him such a brooding mess, if he wasn't so relieved to have Will back.

Hannibal had only a moment to reflect on the pleased astonishment on Will's face before a warm, calloused palm took hold of his jaw and the rest of his laughter was swallowed in a kiss. Just like everything about Will, the kiss was a surprise. It came as a revelation that stalled his thoughts and actions. But it wasn't unwelcome, never unwanted. For just a few stolen seconds, there was only silence in Hannibal's mind. A quiet, calm emptiness where he savored Will. His warmth, his sweetness, his soft breath against Hannibal's lips.

He pulled Will to him with an arm around his waist, delightful and snug against him. Hannibal couldn't help trailing kisses from his mouth to the swell of his cheekbone, tracing the flushed skin of his temple to settle on his forehead. He tightened his grip on Will and Katinka. Treasures, both of them. Exquisite and rare and his. Until this moment, he could not name another of equal perfection. But then the air between them seemed to shift. Will trembled in his hold, breath hitching in panic instead of passion. A hint of salt was on his lips when they found their way back to Will's. He was crying.

Hannibal shushed his whimpering sobs as he tried to coax Will away from whatever destructive thoughts were barreling through that mind of his. “It's all right.”

A litany of whispered apologies pressed against his lips and Hannibal felt something sharp and cold tear at his insides. Just as quickly as he came Will left, taking Katinka with him. Hannibal stood frozen for a moment, shame and self-loathing not his own burning through him. He had to turn away from the sight of Will disappearing through the door. Running once again from him. Fleeing from what he wanted.

Will's continuous denial made Hannibal feel feral.

He wanted to pursue, chase and run down. The reasons that always stopped him before seemed brittle in the wake of nearly having Will. Cheap excuses that hurt them both. What was the purpose of denying them be together when neither wanted to be apart? Hannibal took a moment to gather the tattered remains of his control. Will always undid him. It was a glorious feeling. And excruciating. Will's thrilling torments—if that's all he ever offered him, Hannibal would eagerly and gratefully glut himself on them for the rest of his life.

It took longer than usual to regain his equilibrium. As he surfaced from the coolest, calmest depths of his memory palace, he noticed a warm presence at his back. The figure paced behind him, had been for some time. A caged beast prowling in the dark. Nigel.

“He's going to leave.”

Hannibal refused to be carried away with Nigel's mounting anxiety. “No, he isn't.”

“Are you so sure?”

“He wouldn't. Will has come too far.” Hannibal took his time straightening his cuffs and smoothing his hair back. “His place is with us. With Katinka and I.”

“He's terrified. A cornered little thing. Something spooked him.” When Hannibal failed to have a ready answer for that, Nigel stopped wandering about and turned to him. “Tell me I'm wrong. Do your parlor trick. Prove me fucking wrong.”

Hannibal took in a deep breath. What started as placation quickly turned to something else entirely. A sense of urgency as he catalogued the new elements that clung to Will. “I smell the cold. Snow. Damp, frozen earth that has gone undisturbed, aside from animals. Old, dusty wood. Trees. Pine and birch.”

Nigel came closer, phantom breath stirring against the back of Hannibal's neck. “He's gonna disappear, Han. Somewhere hidden. Where no one will look for him. When he goes, he won't want to be found.”

Hannibal finally turned to face Nigel. His words brought a sick, oily feeling to his stomach. “There is no place he could ever go where I wouldn't find him, follow him. I will do everything in my power to keep him tied to me. Make him feel how I feel. To leave would ruin me.”

Nigel stepped closer. “Show, don't tell.” He studied him for a moment, smiling at what he found. “How does it feel to know, after everything you've done, *this* is what makes you fucking insane? We're more alike than I thought. Fucking love...Take my advice: let it consume you. Let him be swept away with you. From that kiss, I'd say he's more than half-way there. Don't fucking retreat right now, or you'll lose him.”

Hannibal opened his eyes and noted the time. He let Will have his solitude for over half an hour. The thought of leaving him alone any longer unsettled him. He knew it was paranoia but he had a sudden fear of Will leaving in the night. Before he could rethink it, he left his room to knock on Will's door. Nigel's words echoed through his mind and he very nearly brought the door down when there was no answer right away.

“Yes?”

“May I come in?”

After whatever moral debate Will fought with himself, the door cracked open for him. He widened the entrance for Mira to slip through. It was quiet inside, dark after he closed the door. In the time they were apart, Katinka was put to bed. The scent of her soap lingered in the air. There was a resigned melancholy all around them. Hannibal followed Will further inside. Only the fireplace gave off light. Will had yet to speak, to look at him. He kept his gaze at Hannibal's shoulder but every line of his body was tense, resigned.

“I'm sorry,” Will said and his voice was firm, measured. Did he practice before Hannibal came to collect him?

“For what, exactly, are you apologizing?”

“You know what.”

“For kissing me? Or for leaving immediately after without a single coherent word?” He didn't want to feel anger. Of course he understood Will's regret, his hesitation. That didn't make it easier to hear, especially because he knew Will was only apologizing due to a misplaced sense of morals.

“It was wrong of me to do that to you.”

“How so?” Even now he couldn't curb his curiosity. Will was an endless source of fascination.

“Your family has been nothing but kind and generous. You have been nothing but understanding and accommodating. I took advantage. I overstepped. I'm sorry.”

Interesting rationale. Reasonable. Meaningless. Nowhere in his refutation was a denial of want. Hannibal smiled, feeling the first stirrings of amusement since their encounter began. There was no reason for Will to deny himself. Was it for the sake of staying true to his role? Would Will go that far? A life of a celibate widow? Hannibal came to him and trailed his fingers along his jaw. Perhaps he should be thankful Will could make himself sick with guilt at the thought of lying to him and his family. Right now, he could only feel frustration and a dire need to poke. To push. To send Will over the edge into action.

“Am I a replacement, then? Do you see Nigel when you look at me? Are you seeking comfort and pleasure from a dead man?” A dirty tactic. Low-hitting and satisfying. Hannibal thrilled at the steel in Will's eyes at the accusation. The thought seemed to anger him, rattle him out of the morose shroud that had clung to him for days.

“No. Nigel was charming and funny. Nigel was ostentatious and uncouth. Nigel was handsome and strong and rude and clever. I'll never not feel remorse when I think about Nigel. But I ache for someone else. I only see him. I only want him. Every part of him. Not Nigel. Hannibal. Cold, calculating Hannibal. Quiet, curious, contemplative Hannibal. Dangerous, beautiful Hannibal.”

Lovely. The words tumbled free like raw, precious stones. A tirade of tenderness. One word of affirmation was all Hannibal needed. Will had gifted him several. His confession had barely ended before Hannibal tightened his grip and yanked him close. He heard him cry out, no doubt in shock as well as pain. He knew his hands were rough as they took hold of Will, knew he wasn't gentle with teeth and lips. Knowing was very different than caring. He kissed Will with the intent to bruise, to mark, to finally binge on the sweetness kept from him.

Will pressed closer, wrapping his arms around him. Hannibal marveled at the way Will clung to him. When was the last time he allowed himself such comfort? Had he ever let himself go? Hannibal wanted that more than anything. He wanted to see it, experience it first-hand. A

disciple at his lonely god's feet. He wanted Will to choose him. Consume him. Take everything he offered. Make demands. Call for blood. Love him. Ruin him. He could take it. He would treasure every moment of Will's surrender and repay his trust with all that he had.

Hannibal teased more kisses from perfect lips. He pulled back only to look Will over. Even now, soothed from his earlier sadness, he held himself back. Always keeping others at a safe distance. Always having to stay on alert. “You've been alone so long, haven't you? All of this, you have done on your own. You don't have to anymore. You must know that.”

“I can't.” Will shook his head, denying himself even now as he held Hannibal tight and kissed him. “It has to be this way. Has to.”

“It doesn't. Not anymore.”

Hannibal couldn't help laughing. If Will only knew. The game between them was drawing to a close, but it had yet to end. Until Will decided to tell him the truth, Hannibal would continue to play. He couldn't say he minded all that much. Watching Will manipulate the board was as enjoyable as lining up his own pieces. Hannibal could be patient. Luring Will out to play in the open was proving to be an intoxicating affair. He pushed Will towards his bed, grabbing for the hem of Will's shirt as steady hands made quick work of his shirt buttons.

“I can help you. Let me help you. Ask me. Tell me to.” Hannibal ran his hand into Will's hair. As soft as he imagined. The slip of it between his fingers and against his palm an addictive sensation. Will nodded, blindly seeking his lips after every demand whispered between them. It wasn't enough. Hannibal needed to hear him say it. Binding and unbreakable. He tightened his grip on Will's hair and wrenched to focus his wandering mind. “*Tell me*.”

Will was shocked by the movement, to feel pain at his touch. The response was immediate, interesting and gratifying. He gasped, nodding his consent. Finally yielding. At least for now. “Yes. Help me. I need you, Hannibal.”

Never had Hannibal imagined being granted permission would be such an electrifying thing. There came an extra thrill, knowing what all Will just invited in. He asked for help and he would have it. His need for Hannibal finally spoken aloud. Hannibal would hold nothing of himself back. It was all for Will. He pressed his devotion into every inch of skin uncovered. He sought out every scar, from the brushes with Death that brought Will to him to the reminders of old battles fought a world away.

Will trembled at each touch. His tears had yet to stop. Was a soft handling so rare for him? But Will's mouth was demanding, hands greedy. Hannibal pulled him closer and luxuriated in the taste of salt on his skin, thrilled at every gasp and whimper, understood the tremors for what they were. Overwhelmed. Starving. Will was letting his instincts take over where he would otherwise hesitate or deny himself. It was wondrous to behold, to be at the mercy of whatever Will's whims decided.

Hannibal fell happily when Will tugged him into bed.

Every touch, every sound—they belonged to Hannibal. Will gave so freely now. The final hints of resistance splintered and dissolved among the cold sheets and their warm bodies. Hannibal had kicked and pushed the extra trappings of the ornate bed away, only wanting Will beneath him. He surrounded him. Hannibal would happily drown in him.

He pressed closer, falling further into the tight hold of Will's body. Every part of him was beautiful, a work of weathered art. There wasn't a place Hannibal didn't explore, appreciate. He couldn't help the grip he kept on one muscular thigh as they moved together. The skin would bruise. Will cared as little as Hannibal. Will left his own marks. Violent and selfish and possessive. Hannibal adored him.

Lines of fire across his back. A trickle of blood down his side. Hannibal grabbed Will's hand, no longer wrapped in bandages or swollen, and kissed along the pale skin. He nipped at the tender flesh in the join of his elbow and was rewarded with Will sitting up to pull him into a kiss. Snug in the cradle of Hannibal's lap, Will watched him with something like disbelief.

Will ran a hand through his hair, playful in the way he pulled and petted. “You're so beautiful.” He slumped closer, flushed face hidden in Hannibal's neck. A sweet kiss placed shyly on his carotid. “The most beautiful man I've ever seen.” He sounded drugged. Slurred. High on endorphins.

Hannibal had heard such sentiments before. His favorite way to distract and disarm. This was different. Will whispered praise as he teased his wandering hands along Hannibal's own scars. Knowing and assessing as they tickled along his sides, across his shoulders, down his arms. What was usually hidden by suits and silk now on display, in all their revealing glory. It was a blow to Hannibal's gut and shattered any composure he might have had left. He clung to Will and moved faster, harder, used anything and everything he had to make the man in his arms feel just as destroyed.

A sudden, violent pitch against him and then Will sank his teeth into Hannibal's shoulder. The pain was shocking, blinding. There was a great possibility he was bleeding. Hannibal hoped the wound scarred. Another mark upon him, placed there by the only person he would ever cherish in such a way. He fisted the curls at the back of Will's head to hold him in place, falling forward to press him back into the mattress. Sharp teeth and a locked jaw only released him after his movements slowed to a sated stop. He caught his breath against Will's heaving chest.

Will's kisses were soft so soon after such a frenzied coupling, his hands achingly gentle. Soothing, reverent, Hannibal couldn't control how he trembled beneath his care. He allowed himself just one more moment of basking in Will's loveliness before he left the sanctuary of his arms. Will let him go, but he watched his every move. Hannibal ignored the searing hunger of the stare that followed him as he made his way in the near total darkness to the bathroom.

He shielded his eyes from the light as he turned on the faucet and studied his reflection in the mirror. Wild-eyed, debauched. A lascivious glow to his skin. When the water was warm, Hannibal wiped the blood from his side. A thrill ran through him at the sight of the scratches that scored across his shoulders and back. And the bite. Sadly, it wasn't deep enough to scar but the bruise would be a pretty reminder for several days. Blood had dripped down his collar

bone, smeared against his skin by greedy lips. Did his beloved enjoy his taste? With that thought floating through his otherwise blissfully empty mind, he returned to Will's side.

* * * * *

The dawn was a long way off. It was the time of night that was the darkest. No moon, no stars, no fire to see by. The cold crept close, inching along the floors and seeping into walls. But where they were needed no extra light, the cold couldn't penetrate the warmth between them. Hours ticked along steadily and ever forward yet Hannibal did not sleep. He couldn't bear to.

Will slept in his arms and Hannibal couldn't stop touching, staring. He wouldn't stop until he knew every inch of him. Exhausted from the past few days, Will didn't wake at his determined exploration. Sometimes, he would begin to dream. Nightmares tried to invade his fragile calm but Hannibal would banish them with whispers of his devotion and light kisses to delightfully flushed skin.

Hannibal turned on his side and slipped a hand into soft curls when Will settled closer. He was enchanted, mesmerized. Such an agonizing day of worry and painful separation morphed into an experience Hannibal likened to the divine. Not just in body; heart and mind and soul —he felt at one with Will. He *knew* Will and he felt Will was close to completely knowing him.

It had been beautiful. All the sweet confessions Will gifted him. Every secret doubt Hannibal harbored dashed to nothingness. Whatever Will was to Nigel, whatever he felt for his brother —it didn't compare to what he felt for Hannibal. It wasn't what Will wanted from him. And Hannibal would give him everything. His love. His protection. The blood of his enemies served to him in silver bowls, if Will wished.

Whether he wished or not. Blood needed to be spilled and Hannibal would happily wield the knife.

Nigel had not been wrong. Will almost took flight as a bird does when sensing death close by. Hannibal would never allow that. The only way to ensure Will stayed put was to go hunting once more.

In the darkness Hannibal plotted and planned. Charlie was taken care of. Ms. Lounds was contained for the time being. An easy remedy when she proved too much of an annoyance. Barely worth consideration. The other one. Mason Verger. Thinking of him again made Hannibal's teeth ache with the need to tear. He recalled the files that were sent to him just that morning and couldn't help sneering into the dark.

Mason's spoiled past was littered with stints of community service verdicts and dropped charges. Trails of disgraced doctors, police and politicians in the wake of his deviant activity. A monster of a different kind that Hannibal found repulsive. No art in his violence. No love and vision in the urges and appetites he sated.

The thought of such a vile creature being responsible for Nigel's death and Will's distress filled Hannibal with his own urges. He could turn such a disgusting sack of flesh and bones

into something meaningful. His greatest endeavor yet. The first to experience Hannibal's evolving vision. A glorious aspiration such a pig deserved.

Hannibal settled inside the nest they made of thick blankets and soft sheets and pulled Will tighter. He ran his lips along Will's scar on his forehead and buried his nose in wild tangles of silky hair, absorbing his scent and heat. What a marvelous boy he was. It was because of Will he was evolving. Will inspired him, showed him that even this, what Hannibal did in the shadows, could be elevated to art. Yet another form of theatre.

Hannibal smiled against Will's crown as he wondered if his muse's participation would advance beyond mere influence. To have Will join him would be the closest thing to perfection Hannibal could imagine. Enjoy a hunt together. Share a kill. Merge their separate styles into one complete design. Hannibal could hardly dare to hope. Will only had to see, to understand. Something told him it wouldn't take much to persuade Will.

The thought sent a fluttering flame of giddiness through his belly. Hannibal finally allowed sleep to overtake him. A smile on his face and his lover safe in his arms as he dreamt of a future he would kill to ensure.

Chapter End Notes

pterodactyl screech I hate this chapter so much. There were so many times I wanted to delete it and start over but there were some things that had to happen to progress the story and I couldn't get it to not sound clunky and weird. I apologize if it's awful and I hope you were able to trudge through it. I promise I'll be better next update. If there's any confusion or you have any questions, please feel free to drop me a line.

I hope you found some enjoyment in this week's update. See you Thursday! In the meantime, please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! I feel *much* better about this chapter than the last one. It's a bit of a timestampy kind of thing. I hope you all like it. This chapter begins the Third Act. Before I end this note, I just wanted to thank Stralovat, Emily_Elm, ropaola and Welcome2the_Goondocks for taking the time to leave me such wonderful comments. I really appreciate it. :D

Please enjoy, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Act Three:

The Lion's Share

Chapter Twelve

It was late by anyone's standards. Hannibal thought perhaps he would come downstairs to find his family up and about, seeing to breaking their fasts themselves, if they still lingered around the estate. He needn't have worried. As mid-autumn edged closer, the days grew darker. Colder. Hannibal could feel it already. Winter promised to be a harsh, cruel season. His family fought the chill by simply not getting out of their beds.

A strong temptation, even for him this morning. Leaving Will, and the warmth of his bed, proved a surprisingly arduous task. The allure of feeding Will after the night they spent together was too lovely a thought to not indulge. They would have other mornings to idle the hours away. Also, Katinka cared not for the romantic whims of her fathers when hunger rumbled through her sensitive belly.

Hannibal spared her a smile as she kept him company in the kitchen. Her bottle had only a few sips remaining which, after helping her fit tiny, grasping fingers around, he left up to Katinka to coax out herself. So far, their experiment in motor skills was a mixed outcome. He caught the bottle from rolling to the floor more than once, but Katinka was showing excellent progress.

From her bassinet she watched as he first began preparation for brunch and then started work on the flower arrangement for the dining table. He couldn't help kissing her and tickling her toes in between a snip of a stalk or trim of a leaf. One day, he would have her assist him in this, teach her the art in the language of flowers and plants. While coffee burbled and frittata baked, Hannibal explained his work to his pupil.

He held up one of the flowers after ridding it of some of the larger leaves. A beautiful specimen. So dark red were the stems and leaves, they appeared black. The actual flowers were small clusters of petals that had the most charming dusty rose color. “Night Embers Sedum—a cure for broken and wounded hearts. Wax Flower have many meanings. Among them are: lasting love, patience and enduring wealth,” he said as he carefully placed a few of the lavender-colored flowers among the Sedum. Hannibal smiled as he took up another flower, the gray-green of it vibrant and refreshing for such a dreary morning. He leaned closer to Katinka to let her grab at the fingers of his free hand while he showed her the flower. “This is Protea. One of the oldest species found in all the world, my darling. Perhaps, named after the Greek god Proteus, a willful shapeshifter. They symbolize change, transformation and courage.”

The only thing left to do was trim a few more leaves and clear away the rubbish. He brushed his fingertips along the soft petals and smiled, thinking of the man who endlessly inspired him. Hannibal looked away to find he was being watched from the doorway. Robertus stared, most likely for some time, a surprised kind of wonder on his face as he took in the spectacle Hannibal surely made. Still in pajamas that were tossed on not that long ago, hair mussed and figure tousled and soft. Hannibal felt soft. He didn't care.

Robertus came into the kitchen and gave Katinka his usual greeting of kisses and cooed words of nonsense. All the while, he looked over Hannibal's arrangement with incredulous delight. He reached out to pet one of the clusters of Sedum just as Murasaki joined them.

“I take it, you convinced Will to not roam too far from us again,” Robertus said.

“He is staying,” Hannibal confirmed, unable to keep from smiling as he wiped down the counter before grabbing the bowl he kept to chill in the fridge.

Robertus took Katinka out of her bassinet. “That is wonderful news.” His smile dimmed as he watched Murasaki approach the counter, a worried frown marring her lovely face.

“Oysters?” Murasaki watched as Hannibal made quick work of shucking the shellfish, conserving the liquor and placing them in an artful array on a waiting platter.

Hannibal paused in the motions of preparing the rest of their brunch at her tone, at Robertus' subtle fretting. “Not a morning for mollusks?”

“I am only wondering if they are making an appearance due to craving, or improving Will's taste,” Murasaki said as she sipped her tea.

Hannibal smiled and continued shucking. “The protectiveness you both show Will warms my heart. It makes me happy, knowing he is so well-looked after if I am not around.” He wiped his hands on his apron and retrieved the pitcher he put in the refrigerator earlier to pour them all a chilled coupe. The sweet, Champagne cocktail was just the thing to round out the meal Hannibal had planned. He sipped his before he confessed, “Oysters are used for a great deal more than improving the flavor of something that will be eaten. I assure you, I am preparing them only with the erotic implications in mind.”

Robertus left the room with a laugh after that, stolen baby in one hand and his drink in the other. Murasaki was relieved, he could tell. Will had done nothing to win a place on Hannibal's menu. She also gave him a look he hadn't seen since he was a boy. One that said he had an extra strenuous sparring session in his very near future if he insisted on his cheekiness.

* * * * *

For, technically, no longer having anything to do with his time, Hannibal found a rare, quiet morning where he could do whatever he wanted. Catch up on some reading? Work on his latest composition? Perhaps, make note of what was in the pantry and freezer to plan the menu accordingly? Nothing so productive, or good for his mental health.

Hannibal had spent the morning going over everything he knew, every scrap of information gathered for him, on Margot Verger.

She was a detail to the story that had never sat well with him. A piece to the puzzle that remained missing. If Hannibal could just uncover a few more answers, he knew the entire mystery would be solved. Who was she to Will? Were they lovers? Was there truth to the rumors of her death? No. Whatever circumstances that befell her, she wasn't dead. Wherever she was, Will knew.

Hannibal liked to think he was beyond petty emotions such as jealousy. Envy. Resentment. It was all so inelegant. He would like to think himself not so mundane, but he was not in the habit of lying to himself. It did not escape his notice that one moment he was pondering the connection between Will and Ms. Verger, and the next he sought Will out to drag him into the man's bed. Perhaps, that should be something he explored in therapy. Once he started seeing a psychiatrist.

Hannibal panted against the back of Will's neck and reveled in the feeling of their hearts slowing simultaneously in the aftermath of his ambush. “I apologize for interrupting your work,” he said after he caught his breath.

Will laughed and pressed back against Hannibal's chest, not even pretending to try to return to the computer Hannibal man-handled him from. The screen went black ages ago. “I'm not complaining.” He stretched within the confines of his hold and took one of Hannibal's hands in his. “This is definitely worth any timed-out sessions or closed windows.”

Even as Hannibal relished Will's sweetness, something caught on the many webs in his mind. Snagged on sticky threads that held all the tighter the more the thought attempted to wriggle past his attention. It set him on edge and he hid how he tensed by leaning closer to nuzzle along Will's neck, taking in his scent and kissing down to his shoulder. “Were you talking with the friend you reconnected with?”

Will hummed in question, still addled from their earlier activities, before he shook his head. “No. We rarely correspond. It's enough that I know she's there.”

“An old flame?”

“No, nothing like that. More similar to capture-bonding, really—a shared trauma that led to friendship.”

“Bonds created out of necessity.” Hannibal rolled to press Will deeper into the bed, tightening his arms around him. He kissed along the scar on Will's shoulder. “Have you ever had any women as lovers?”

Will shrugged, sleepy and sated and open to questioning. “A few. I wouldn't say what I had before—before Nigel—could count as 'lovers.'”

He stumbled over the half-truth and Hannibal smiled, nipping at the jagged scar tissue. “Why not?”

“People don't often find me...palatable,” he decided on. Will gripped his arms to keep them in place, an odd, faraway, cadence to his voice. “Before you, my relationships had been conditional. Transactional.”

“How so?”

“Beyond the looks, the body, the fleeting pleasure sex affords...” Suddenly, Will turned to look at him over his shoulder. No indirect glance or shuttering his gaze. He let Hannibal see what he constantly tried to hide. “They stomach me. Or they think I can get them something they want. It never lasts long—I would rather it didn't. For everyone's sake. If they stay, most people don't like what they find.”

If Hannibal could see Will, Will could see Hannibal. He smiled. “I'm not most people.”

“No. You're not.”

There was something of a warning in his voice and Hannibal couldn't help chuckling. An absolutely delectable noise escaped Will when Hannibal grabbed his wrist and yanked, slamming him onto his back. Hannibal loomed over him, fingers sliding from their hold on Will's tender joint to grasp his hand. Restrained, exposed and vulnerable, his first instinct was to fight but Will remained where Hannibal put him. He smiled and traced the scar across Will's tender belly, blood heating at the way muscles twitched beneath his touch.

“Do you think your urges, all your secret appetites, are worse than mine?” Hannibal settled between Will's thighs, swallowing his gasp in a kiss. “Have you truly fooled yourself into believing that everything you have done—what you will do—could ever turn me away from you?”

Will pulled him closer, kisses and body doing what it could to change the subject. No denial or acceptance of Hannibal's words. That was fine, for the time being. Hannibal didn't need Will to acknowledge his love, their absolute likeness. Not yet. For now, he let Will have his victories and enjoyed the novelty of the physical side to their relationship. However, he doubted any facet of their intimacy would ever be dulled by time.

There was still so much that Will surprised him with. One such unexpected gift was the realization of how starved for touch Will was. Hannibal had thought perhaps Will would be a

cold lover. Distant. Pull away from him as soon as he achieved orgasm. An understandable defense mechanism, if not a disappointing one. However, Hannibal was happily proven wrong.

Will always pulled him close, during and after. He was loathe to release him even to allow Hannibal space to clean them up. Hannibal adored Will's hunger for contact and pleasure, the tinge of brutality in his need. He felt the same and could not remember ever sharing his bed in quite this way. There had been rough encounters, pleasure borne from hate, consensual experiments in violence that tested every threshold he and his lovers had. Nothing like this.

In all his life, nothing could compare.

This was knowing they could share their frenzy with one another and be confident that the other would not shy away or be disturbed. Wanting to consume and be consumed. Obsessive and dangerous and dark and utterly perfect. The only way they knew how to love.

However, that didn't mean Hannibal was a discourteous lover. A pained whimper escaped Will as Hannibal's hips circled harder against him and his hands splayed against his chest in a reflexive move to stop him. “What it is it?” Hannibal smoothed Will's hair back and slowed his movements enough for them to catch their breath. “What do you need, darling? Anything. Tell me.”

Will shuddered beneath him and smiled. “I might be a bit too sore to do that right now.”

Hannibal returned his lazy smile, kissing along his neck before he reached his ear. “I'm not.”

Silence and static filled the air around them, between them. Will grew still, muscles bunching and tensing as if readying to pounce. When he struck, Hannibal's surprised laughter rang out into the room. Hannibal found their positions quickly reversed. Will peppered his face with kisses before leaning away to rifle through his nightstand. He was gentle, if firm. Thorough and attentive. Such a considerate lover he had. Hannibal was grateful Katinka was with her aunt. It wouldn't do to wake her.

* * * * *

One of Will's many talents that never ceased to amaze Hannibal was his elusion of detail without lying. Perfected over years. Some called it lying by omission. Hannibal called it wordsmithing. After he researched what he could of Will Graham, it pleased him how much truth Will told him, his family. Will couldn't very well tell them he was former FBI, or even his real name for his ruse to work, but he easily imparted the fact that he lived in Virginia before moving to Romania. And on and on, little gems of his real self buried in the stories he had to tell.

Just a taste of truth to make the lies easy to swallow. Hannibal admired him greatly and hoped Will would think the same, once all was made known.

Hannibal looked forward to the future, when there would be nothing but truth between them, but didn't stop himself from thoroughly enjoying the present. Amid the scheming and plotting, passed the vigilance for threats, was the tender care and cultivation of their

relationship. A fragile, vulnerable thing that began inside a battered and strange chrysalis the likes of which Hannibal had never seen nor could he guess at what would hatch forth.

A week of their evolved connection, the results of his and Will's careful handling of the tenuous peace between them, and Hannibal was still left guessing at where all they could find themselves. Opportunities they would only ever share together. But not just yet without peril. It was a delicate dance, loving Will. A balancing act of knowing Will and letting him slowly see parts of Hannibal he never allowed anyone else to catch even a glimpse of.

Hannibal never thought he would have this. Honestly, he never thought it was something he wanted. Baring himself completely to a person not related to him—a desire he never had and didn't understand in those around him. Now that he experienced it, acceptance and understanding, he craved it more than anything. What made the rush more addictive, heady, was that he knew Will could sense it, the monster beneath three-piece suits. Yet he didn't pull away from Hannibal, run from him. Will reveled in it, demanded every part of Hannibal for himself. Hannibal would give him everything. Bones and all.

Footsteps echoing through the hall beyond roused Hannibal from his thoughts and he stood from the small table to receive Mischa's hug. She kissed his cheek and sat in the chair he pulled out for her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said.

“There's no need to apologize. I wanted to surprise you.” He smiled as he took in her baggy clothes, hair pulled back in a braid and a smudge of pain on her forehead. “Working hard, my dear?”

Hannibal set the covered dishes from the large carrier he brought on the table and chuckled as Mischa immediately began to scoop food onto her plate. His sister had not been up to the main house in days, had not been anywhere. Shut away in her cottage and Hannibal refused to let her survive on a diet of whatever junk food she currently had squirreled away.

“Not the hardest work I've done. Concept art, that I may use for the cover of my latest book. Should I decide not to, I know some people who are interested in them. We'll have to see.” She sighed and gazed out the window at the snow that continued to fall throughout the day. “I'm beginning to feel stagnant here. The cold wouldn't be so terrible if there were marks of civilization to distract me. I hate the emptiness.”

Hannibal watched as a shadow came into Mischa's gaze. What he told Will was true. Mischa didn't remember what happened to them when they were children. Only the sensations remained to haunt her. Extreme cold made her anxious. Isolation caused a building hyper-vigilance until she was a rattled bundle of nerves. Guilt formed heavy in his gut. Mischa had remained at the estate because he stayed, because Katinka and Will called Castle Lecter home.

He poured them a glass of the wine he brought before sitting down. “Decide on the day, dearest, and I will arrange for us a more urban setting.”

“Us?”

“You and I, with Katinka and Will.” They shared a smile at the idea.

“Showing them around does sound wonderful. A change of scenery would do us all some good. But that's planning for another time. I'm starving.” He caught the scowl she gave the plate of garden salad he pushed close but her attention soon focused on their main course after sampling a bite of the spicy meat and rice. “This is delicious, Hannibal. A new recipe you're trying out on us?”

“In a way. 'Fish in tomato gravy.'” He hid his smile in the glass of white wine he sipped. “Will made it.”

A slow, mischievous grin spread across Mischa's lips. “Did he now?”

“With the pike-perch he caught.”

“Oh?” Laughter teased the edges of her growing smile. “And where did he catch such a tasty thing?”

“I showed him the dock earlier this week. He loves it there and has visited the lake quite often since.”

“When he's not with you.”

“That goes without saying. He sends his regards,” he added.

Mischa finally laughed and took up her own glass of wine, the melodious sound ending on a soft sigh. “I almost can't bear how adorable the two of you are.”

Hannibal ignored her poking as they finished their lunch. Later, they sat close by the fire and ate an over-sized serving of the bread pudding with whiskey sauce he brought with him. Another courtesy of Will. Mischa rose to take their dishes back to the kitchen but Hannibal's gentle hold on her wrist kept her by his side.

He met her questioning gaze and said, “I love him, Mischa.”

“I know. Of course you do.” Her smile was blinding as she leaned down to kiss the crown of his head. “He is the only one I have found to be worthy of you, Hannibal. Will is the only one I would ever give you to.”

She went without a fight when he tugged her into his arms. His treasure, his delight. Mischa laughed as he held her tight, teasing him for his sentiments. He didn't care. Never had he felt so full, so happy. They could spare a few minutes more just like this. Let whatever horrors Hannibal knew were sniffing at his door wait for another day. For now, he was surrounded by everything and everyone who mattered most to him and he would revel in the light they brought him before the darkness inevitably came.

* * * * *

In the past few weeks, Hannibal noticed a certain kind of resignation that emanated from Will. A melancholic consideration. During one such spell, Hannibal remembered the snippet

of conversation he was lucky to overhear between Will and Ms. Lounds and Will's mood began to make sense. Will was waiting for Ms. Lounds to approach him once more. Play her hand. Patient, clever Will wouldn't make a move until she did.

It made Hannibal happy to compare and contrast their methods of hunting. Will lured, stayed still and silent to draw his prey in. Hannibal liked to lay traps and when his quarry was snared he struck them down. He liked to stalk. It was always thrilling to keep tabs, to know exactly where they were and what they were doing, secure in his knowledge that he could take them at any time. He loved a well-executed ambush.

How wonderful it would be when they joined their efforts together.

Unfortunately, they were both forced to wait. He couldn't imagine what all Will worked behind the curtain of his grand scheme but he didn't think it was simple machinations. Nothing was with Will. Hannibal himself had several threads left untied in his tapestry. Some parts to the whole more complete than others but all were in a suspension that only time passing would set into motion again. It was irritating leaving so much to others, having events run out of his hands, but it was a temporary irritation. And there were so many lovely things to occupy his attention while he tested his patience.

Long ago, everyone retired for the night. His family safe and fed, snug in their beds. Katinka enjoyed her late feeding and gentle rocking back to sleep. She was his joy and his miracle he would never tire of tending to. All were wonderful distractions, but none so much as the man currently in his bed. Will straddled his hips, lost in sensation. Hannibal took in every twitch, every sharp exhale, Will's pleasure more fulfilling than his own. A feast for his senses. The only sustenance he would ever need.

Even in darkness Will was exquisite. Fire and candlelight against the planes of his body flickered him in out of the shadows like something from Hannibal's dreams. A vision writhing in black silk like a fallen angel deep in the pit. Hannibal almost didn't dare to breathe in fear of waking from this sight.

Will's eyes were closed, a faint smile on bruised lips, as he listened to the wind whip around the castle and ice patter against the windows. “Creepy castle on a snowy hill. Howling winds blowing across the moors.”

“We don't have moors,” Hannibal said, just to be contrary.

Will ignored his impudence to tease him further. “Count Lecter, in his dreary black castle. You could have stepped right out of a Gothic story.”

Hannibal had no solid rebuttal for such a charge. His mind was wonderfully empty aside from his consideration of the slick heat of Will's skin beneath his hands and the building storm outside. “Soon, Mischa will have to move up here to her old room. Safe from the coming storm. In my 'creepy, dreary black castle.'”

“She does that every winter?”

Hannibal shrugged, unconcerned with everything other than the beautiful angles and curves so generously set before him. “If she's in the country. It's less stress than trying to get from the cottage to the castle. Safer that way.”

“We could get snowed-in? From the highway?” Will's pleasure was momentarily forgotten as worry clouded his flushed features.

“It's happened before. But our pantries are full. The cellar is stocked. We won't have to resort to cannibalism.” He couldn't help smiling at his little joke.

“That's good. I'd be terrible eating.”

“Is that so?”

“I probably taste like carp.”

“I have to strongly disagree. I quite enjoy the way you taste.” Hannibal flipped them about, Will now secure beneath him, so he could reaffirm his claim.

Will's laughter echoed around them. Hannibal took his time. Will was not something to rush but savor. He started from his curls, taking in the warm scent, and worked his way down. The scar on his forehead always drew his attention. A cut on his jaw had yet to vanish. And then there was the remnant of whatever tore into Will's sculpted shoulder. By the time his lips found the still so fresh slash across his abdomen, Will was shaking. Trembling hands slipped through his hair, scritched against his scalp, and Hannibal leaned into the gentle touch.

“What are you doing?”

Hannibal looked up at the question asked on hitching breath. There were tears gathering on Will's lashes. His eyes were so blue. Sapphires glinting in the darkness. He stole Hannibal's breath and threatened his sanity, his control. Will could take all three. Hannibal had no use for them.

“I want to devour you.” He kissed Will's stomach, a harsh sucking pull before moving on. Will bruised so prettily. Hopefully, the bite he placed on Will's hip would leave a lasting mark. Hannibal exhaled against the scar that ran the length of Will's thigh. “I want to know every part of you. I want to know you.”

He held Will down when his attention settled entirely on the pursuit of deciphering the complexity of scents and tastes that created the man squirming about beneath him. Hannibal smiled when a brilliant idea came to him. A new game. When Will's breaths came faster, his taste bolder on the tongue, Hannibal pulled back.

“Where were you born?” He didn't let Will answer. The point now was not necessarily to find answers. It was enough to ask, to be heard. Hannibal continued on as if he had never spoken. Every time Will's pleas and cries grew to a certain pitch, Hannibal's ministrations would come to a halt. Throughout Will's frustrated begging, Hannibal asked his questions. “What was the worst job you have ever had? When did you first fall in love? What is the worst thing

you have ever done? What is your greatest triumph? Who was the first to break your heart? What did you want to be when you were a little boy?"

Finally, Will had enough and Hannibal was delighted when he was pulled up Will's glorious form. He kept Hannibal close as he caught his breath. His thumb ran along Hannibal's lips, slightly swollen from energetic use. His kiss was a soft, sweet thing that belied the look in his eyes.

"An archaeologist."

His wolf was a cruel thing, but in all the ways Hannibal loved. To the secrets he guarded, to his violent lust. Will's retaliation was using Hannibal to satisfy himself until he was ragged heap. He left his own marks. The deep scratches on Hannibal's neck burned. Will licked the blood that dripped from them. He soothed Hannibal's shaking form and his kisses tasted like salt and iron.

Drifting in and out of sleep throughout the remainder of the night, Hannibal became aware of skimming touches along his side and arm. Curious fingers finding his own scars left behind from the more deadly encounters he faced over the years. It was easy to find Will's eyes in the dark, watching as he woke.

"What are you thinking?"

Will smiled, a small and playful thing. "Multiple universes."

Hannibal laughed and slid closer, bringing Will into his arms. They had talked of such things before, brought up by Hannibal himself. To hear Will recall something previously shared, to know he listened as closely to Hannibal as he did to Will, filled him with a strange sort of joy. "Physics discussions at three in the morning, after a few rounds of energetic sex—this is why I adore you so."

Will's tentative smile stayed hidden against Hannibal's neck. The grip he had on Hannibal felt desperate, frantic. Hannibal didn't ask what was obviously troubling him, content in the knowledge that Will would speak when he was ready.

"I think of meeting you differently, too," Will murmured against bitten and bruised skin. "No pain. No death. Completely myself. Would you ever have taken notice of me, without the blood between us?"

Hannibal's grip had to be painful but Will only settled closer, holding onto him tighter. "In a pitch-black room filled with a million useless people, I would notice you."

"I imagine finding you, before Nigel. How different it all could have been with just one, simple detail changed."

"Somewhere else, it happened just that way."

Will's laugh was watery, thick with unshed tears. "Did we let ourselves be happy?"

Hannibal pulled Will away from his hiding place by a gentle handful of soft curls. He took in the shape of his face, the curve of his mouth, the sharp cut of his jaw. Already so familiar to him. Essential to him. He kissed lips stained by his own blood. “Sometimes.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've said it for this work, but if anyone feels this is E instead of M, just let me know. I think it's a solid M, but that could just be me.

Whelp. My Benedryl has kicked in and I've completely blanked on what all I was going to say in the end note. I hope everyone reading enjoyed this installment. Stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! You may have noticed the lack of update last week. I blame the snow Mother Nature deemed necessary to dump on my house last week and this week. However, my Internet is working great at the moment and I have a chapter I think you're going to like. :D Thanks so much to Stralovat, Welcome2the_Goondocks and Imanerdandliketoread for taking the time to leave me such wonderful comments last chapter. I really appreciate hearing from you. You all are always so thoughtful and kind and it brightens my day whenever I see you've written me. :)
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen

Hannibal didn't like lying to Will. At all. He would never deny the fun that could be had bending the truth, allowing those around him to see only what he wanted them to. Lies were necessary in his life, he wasn't foolish enough to forget that. Hannibal was an excellent liar and he enjoyed ensnaring the unlucky within the intricate webs he constantly wove. But not Will. He longed for the day all was laid bare between them, nothing hidden amongst the family they were creating.

It wasn't even that he was lying. Mischa did wish to leave and Hannibal never developed the habit of denying her what she wanted. A change of scenery would do them all good. The location for Hannibal's new office and practice wouldn't find itself, after all. Hannibal always thrived in that precarious space of half-truths, but he wanted more than that with Will. Someone he didn't have to keep in the dark. A man who would flourish once untethered. With Hannibal at his side.

It wasn't a lie, but moving for Mischa and his future career were only a small part of why Hannibal wanted to get Will and Katinka out of the serenity of the countryside. Hannibal was tired of hiding, tired of Will hiding from him. He refused to allow this early moment of their relationship be marred by unseen threats that hung over them in constant watch, ready to strike as soon as their guard relaxed. If he let their pursuer catch a glimpse, pick up their scent, they could force them to move.

Hannibal was a good hunter because he was patient and tenacious, but he was ready to move on to the next stage of this comedy of errors. How was Will supposed to grow and prosper under such stress? It wasn't any way to raise a baby, plan a future. They would deal with it all together. The thought made his pulse quicken and he smiled as he took his eyes off the snow and slush on the road to glance at Will.

Will readily agreed to come with him, pleased in a way that Hannibal found endearing. As if Hannibal would entertain the thought of not taking him and Katinka wherever he went from now on. Ridiculous. He could tell the idea of leaving the quiet of Castle Lecter unsettled him, that he would soon be surrounded by more people, but Will sat the entire drive preparing himself instead of voicing his misgivings. A habit Hannibal would break him of.

He looked to the rear-view mirror and found Katinka and Mira both gazing out the window at the passing scenery. New sights and sounds for everyone. Hannibal returned his eyes to the highway, navigating smoothly in and out of early morning traffic. Their cottages were just about another half hour away and he smiled when he thought of his utilitarian lover's reaction upon arrival.

Nowhere near as extravagant as his house in Vilnius, but still a work of exquisite opulence. Parisian style layout and furnishings. Honey-stained wood. Gleaming marble. A peaceful sunroom with an indoor pool. He couldn't wait to witness Will's horrified delight at such decadence. He couldn't wait to convince Will that he was made for finery and comfort.

Will's reaction didn't disappoint. Equal parts intrigued, appreciative and disgusted. Hannibal delighted in every grimace, every shocked look Will couldn't mask. It was not the obvious poor childhood of Will's past that tickled Hannibal. He knew what it was to be hungry and cold. To burn furniture to keep the deadly chill at bay. Boiling pine needles for tea because it was at least *some* kind of nourishment while scrounging around for what would pass as a meal. Did Will have similar stories? He didn't have to ask. The thrill Hannibal found in Will's response to riches and splendor was as simple as it was selfish. There would never be another time that Will would truly go without. Not while Hannibal had breath in his lungs and warm blood in his veins. It was a promise he looked forward to keeping

Much later, Hannibal and Will were sprawled on the floor of their bedroom in front of the fireplace. Their arrival presented a list of new challenges that Will tackled with abandon. He disappeared after settling Katinka for a nap and seeing to Mira, helping Mischa put away everything exactly where she wanted in the cottage next door to them. A truck came to deliver Katinka's bedroom suite just as Will finished whatever Mischa had him doing. Instead of having the movers arrange the furniture how they wanted, Will took it upon himself to not only move the old set out of the room he chose for Katinka but move the new one in. He wasn't satisfied until it looked perfect.

All this strenuous activity done only after Will convinced Hannibal to help him with sweet words and coaxing kisses.

Now, everything was silent. Katinka soundly sleeping down the hall. Mira curled up in her bed in the corner of their room. The noise of the surrounding city a low, constant murmur beyond the treeline of their fenced in property. Not enough to disturb their peace. A reminder that they were no longer only in the company of family. Will didn't seem too anxious. He took to relocating with the ease of someone used to moving. Always ready to drop everything if need be.

Hannibal turned towards Will, the demolished remains of a late-night charcuterie board between them. He admired his profile as Will finished another glass of wine. The chilled bottle of Montrachet almost finished. With the last drop captured on his tongue, Will set his

glass and nibbles aside to slide close. His hand drifted up Hannibal's arm, giving his biceps an appreciative squeeze.

“I liked the sight of you carting around whatever I told you to move about today. You're quite fit, for a doctor.”

Hannibal kissed the cheeky smile from his lips, making quick work of the buttons of Will's shirt. He splayed his hand across Will's sternum and admired the definition and muscular design of him. Adonis, worshiped and adored. A muse he would kill for and lay bloody tribute at his feet. “And you're very strapping, for a cellist,” he said before leaning in to bury his face against Will's neck.

Will kept him in place with a hand to the back of Hannibal's head, petting and pulling and playing as he skimmed his smile against his cheek. “I'm not a cellist. Not for a long time.”

“Ah, yes. Not since Katinka.” Hannibal smiled at the wording and couldn't help poking, lowering his body against Will to cover him. “A househusband, then? Is that how you honed your skills, developed such an impressive physique?”

Will's laugh was an easy breath against his ear and he held him tighter. His hand smoothed the material of Hannibal's shirt, reaching down and around to touch his side, over one of Hannibal's larger scars. An obvious knife wound to someone well-versed in their creation. “I imagine we 'honed our skills' the same way, Hannibal: through practice and the opportunities presented to us.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement, delighted at Will's slightly drunken game of revealing himself. “Opportunities we will now share.” He kissed the heated skin at the vulnerable join of Will's neck and shoulder, taking in the scent of him with a greedy breath.

Will laughed again and squirmed at the sensation. “I've noticed you do that a lot. Smell me.” He took Hannibal by the jaw to see better his face. “Why do you do that a lot?”

Hannibal took his time tracing the edges of Will's smile, the scruffy line of his jaw, before curling his palm around his throat. His pulse never rose, a steady and strong beat that matched his own. “I have always had an extremely keen sense of smell. Some would say it teeters on the brink of disability, as I used to have terrible headaches and spells of nausea due to the myriad of scents I pick up on that most people cannot, but I learned to control it and use it to my benefit. As for 'why:' when it comes to you, I cannot help it.” He leaned once again to nuzzle Will's throat and inhaled deeply before kissing him. “Your scent has changed so much in the time I have known you.”

“My smell has evolved?” A dubious sort of humor thickened Will's voice, vibrating pleasantly against Hannibal's lips.

“Absolutely. And now that you no longer take medication, now that it's all finally out of your system, I can't get enough of it.”

“Good.” Will bucked beneath him to send Hannibal onto his back. In the span of one second to the next, he sat astride his hips. As Hannibal gathered his bearings, Will took up the seven

hundred-dollar Chardonnay and drank it straight from the bottle. Will leaned down to kiss him, wine flooding into Hannibal's mouth. Too soon did he pull away and he smiled when Hannibal grabbed him to keep him in place. “I hope you can never get enough of me, just as I can never get my fill of you.”

“It's all-consuming, isn't it?”

“It hurts. Worse than starvation. Worse than exposure.” Will took another drink. His smile was tremulous when he looked at him. “With all my imagination, all my 'gifts,' I've never felt this.”

“Didn't think you could.”

Will shook his head. “Didn't want to. And I *don't* want it. Not from anyone else. Just you. You and Katinka. I want everything you have to give, and beyond that. I want past your limits and reserves. All-consuming,” he agreed as he finished off the wine in one large gulp.

Hannibal sat up and kissed the scar on Will's forehead. “I'm yours to take, every last piece. If it makes you happy, I'll let you reduce me down to nothing. I want you to be happy.” He cupped his cheek and kissed the sweetness from his lips until nothing remained but Will's own distinctive taste. “Can you be happy here?”

“Yes.” It was said with no hesitation. But then Will settled his startling blue eyes on him, seeing everything Hannibal kept hidden from the world. “Can *you*?”

Hannibal gave the question the consideration and honesty Will deserved. He found the answer quickly and smiled at Will's perception. “I can't deny that I have a strong desire to show you more than this small, conventional corner of the world. Perhaps, one day I'll show you Italy. France, most definitely.” Will's shy smile was too tempting to not kiss. “Do you ever wish to return to America?”

“I hadn't, but taking you and Katinka there, showing you my own roots, sparse as they are, fills me with warmth I've never felt before.” Will sighed and rested his head against Hannibal's shoulder, his voice soft and lovely in his tipsiness. “I just need time. I need more time, and then I'll be free to be with you.”

Hannibal hugged him closer and smiled, smoothing down the errant curls at the back of his head. He stared into the flickering flames and assured Will, “You're with me, regardless of the secrets you insist on protecting.” Will only hummed in question, lulled nearly to sleep by drink and the heat of Hannibal's body against his. He lifted Will away from him to look his fill of his angelic face and smiled at the drowsy-lidded stare of his lover. Languid and divine in the shelter of his arms. Entirely perfect. “We are out of time, darling,” he whispered. He scooped Will up into his hold, the dead weight of his solid body nothing Hannibal wasn't used to. Will was asleep long before Hannibal carried him across the room and lay him in their bed. He smoothed Will's hair back and kissed his scar. “Sleep well. Tomorrow, we begin our hunt of the snakes that insist on slithering close.”

* * * * *

The plan was simple. As most brilliant plans were. Hannibal was particularly proud of this one. All he had to do, all Will had to do, was be seen. Ms. Lounds knew who Hannibal was, who his family were. A tabloid journalist was used to harassing the rich and famous. This would be nothing for a dedicated bloodhound such as she. Once she had his scent, she would follow close for a chance to get Will on his own.

After their first encounter, it became clear that Ms. Lounds didn't alert her employer to Will's whereabouts. No police came calling. No agents of INTERPOL surrounded their home. No Mr. Verger. No other groups of hunters scrambling to take Will as their own. Ms. Lounds intended to collect the bounty herself. She wasn't a fighter, barely had the meat on her bones to defend herself. Reliance on cunning, then. And perhaps a gun. It would be in her best interest to blackmail Will, with the threat of selling him to Mr. Verger enough to keep him in line.

For the last few days after their move, Hannibal made sure to be seen out and about. With Will and Katinka by his side. Hannibal worked hard to be seen, but never giving any who might be looking a clear route to where they lived. In a way, he wished Ms. Lounds or anyone else was so bold as to come to them. A home invasion was so much easier to deal with than all this subterfuge. But rarely was it ever as fun.

That crisp day saw him venturing out with more in mind than playing at being a lure. A milestone, in its own right. However unpleasant it was. The first time in his care that Katinka was sick. She hadn't been feeling well for a few days. Irritated and uncomfortable and not understanding why she felt so, which made her even more fussy and miserable. Her appetite had been off since that morning. All she wanted was the comfort her fathers gave her.

Another opportunity to be seen, Hannibal insisted on being the one to leave their cozy nest for the drug store. He returned to a quiet house. The downstairs area dark and abandoned. Up the winding marble staircase, footsteps echoing along the pristine hall, Hannibal followed the sound of Will talking and Katinka cooing in sleepy contentment. They were in their room instead of the nursery.

The sight that greeted Hannibal made him weak in the knees and his mouth water. Will was coming out of their bathroom, unaware of his arrival. Shirtless and barefoot, donning only one of his flattering pairs of blue jeans. His hair curled further from humidity. The scent of lavender filled the bedroom, overflowing from the bathroom.

Katinka was soothed, though her cheeks were flushed. Her tiny body held an overall flush even bared to the elements as it was. An impromptu afternoon bath had just finished, it would seem. Now she was calm, halfway to sleeping as her cheek lay against Will's heart. Such a beautiful tableau they made. One that Hannibal knew he would sketch from memory as soon as he found the time.

Will stopped whispering gently against the soft crown of her head when he noticed Hannibal and a small smile hid itself in Katinka's wispy curls. “She puked on me. Why it's always me and never anyone else, I don't know.”

“Obviously, it's because she loves you most of all.” Hannibal lifted the tote with his purchases as he came to them. He felt her head and the delicate area under her arm. “She's

not feverish. It's probably just reflux.” He took a bottle from the bag before tossing it on the bed, shaking the syrup before measuring out a dose. “We'll give her fluids other than formula for the day and see how she feels tonight when it's time for her bottle.”

She drank the medicine with less fuss than he expected, cooperative in her sleepy state. Hannibal took her to dress and settle in her crib. A nap would do her nothing but good after such an exhausting day. Katinka was asleep before his kiss touched her cheek. When he returned to their room, he found Will attempting to read the labels on the other bottles. Lithuanian was coming slowly but surely to him and it pleased Hannibal every time he practiced his growing repertoire.

Hannibal came to him, admiring the figure he cut. He couldn't help marvelling at Will. Will tossed the bottle back with everything else and sighed. He smirked when he noticed Hannibal's staring.

“What?”

Hannibal tugged him close by his belt loops and slid his hand through Will's hair. “I was thinking you're uncommonly beautiful.” When it was clear the compliment made Will uncomfortable, he smiled and said, “Coupled with that wondrous mind of yours, you are truly one of the most dangerous things on earth.”

Will laughed and slipped his arms around him. “Beautiful and dangerous, huh? Do you think I'm equally capable of maiming and loving?”

Hannibal smiled as he remembered their soft exchange that felt like a lifetime ago. “I *know* you are. As capable as I am.” A flash of recognition flooded Will's gaze but before anything more could be said, Hannibal shoved him to bounce onto their bed. He knelt between Will's sprawled legs as he slipped his suit jacket off. He couldn't stop his smile from stretching into a satisfied grin when Will sat up to start on the buttons of his waistcoat. “Contrary to what Kasparas implied that night, I don't make it a habit of having young lovers. Though, I suppose I don't make a convincing case of things when Kasparas is half my age and you're at least a decade younger than me.”

Will wasn't gentle with Hannibal or his clothes. “Do me a favor, Hannibal: don't mention him. You're with me.” He trailed a teasing touch along the deep scratches on Hannibal's neck. Scabbed over and slow to heal. They might scar, if Hannibal was lucky.

Hannibal kissed along his neck and shoulder, revelling in Will's strength and power. Potential for terrible things. “He is not worth your disdain. I only mention him to make my point.”

“Make it if you have one,” Will snarled, annoyed and impatient.

Hannibal leaned back as he pulled Will free of his jeans and tossed them in a heap behind him. He savored the sight of him before placing his hands on Will's knees. “It's all so strange.”

“What is?”

“Life, of course. The world is full of nothing but amusements for me. Brief and shallow as they are. Kasparas was one such amusement. Young and beautiful and clever. I realize now he was practice. A hint to what was to come for me.” His name fell from Will's lips on a silent groan and Hannibal bit at his neck as he chased his pleasure.

“Am I another one of your amusements, Hannibal? An upgrade to the standard model?” There was an edge to his voice. A hidden blade in his words and movements, even as he clutched Hannibal to him and kissed whatever he could reach.

Hannibal laughed and tightened his hold on Will. “You are unlike anyone I've ever met. And yet, I know you as I know myself. *That's* what is strange. To find you—younger than me, from the other side of the world. Littered with battle scars.” Hannibal bit harder and Will pressed into his hold, grip bruising Hannibal's hips. He gazed down at the length of Will's body, admiring the marks he left behind. The marks he envied for finding their way onto Will before him. “You are lovelier for your suffering.”

Will shuddered against him, tears clinging to his lashes at Hannibal's words. “So are you.” His hand came up between them to rest against Hannibal's heart.

Hannibal gathered him up, poured every ounce of his devotion into their lovemaking. Will was a gift. A poisoned apple. A curse and a boon. Everything he ever wanted, unknowingly waited for. Everything that could destroy him. Will had so much power over him. Control that Hannibal surrendered to him ready and willing.

“What kind of scars will you leave on me?” Hannibal shivered as greedy hands and sharp nails dragged teasingly along vulnerable flesh. Deadly teeth smiled against bruises and bites lovingly placed in designs only their creator was privy to.

Will cradled him closer, kisses gentle and touch turned soothing as he crooned against his ear. “Only ever as deep and permanent as the ones you've left on me.”

* * * * *

It was a long day with not a lot to show for his efforts. His search for an office and site for his future practice did produce some promising places, but nothing he wanted to commit to yet. Perhaps Will would accompany him the next time and share his thoughts.

In between real estate searches, luring Ms. Lounds closer, settling Katinka into her new life and properly courting Will, Hannibal dedicated the rest of his time to locating the lost remains of Gabriela Ibanescu. He couldn't ask Will about her, their relationship or what he knew of her, and was forced to start his search completely from scratch. All Hannibal had to go on was old paperwork and word-of-mouth that Nigel's wife was in fact on the train with him during the accident.

The thought of the young woman in the photograph he now possessed missing and unaccounted for made a sick, cold feeling creep along his insides. He was angry, he realized. On Nigel's behalf, for the spouse he could no longer protect. For Will, whose depression and guilt stemmed from the lies he had to tell, the life he had to take over. For Katinka, who

would only know of her mother from third-hand accounts and old photos. He was determined to find Gabriela, bring her home with Nigel when the time came.

To do that, Hannibal enlisted the help of one of his oldest acquaintances. Their methods were vastly different from Lidija's, not afraid to work outside of the law. Hannibal paid Girdas a substantial amount of money to find both Gabriela and Ms. Lounds, by any means necessary. Money enough to keep a constant eye on Ms. Lounds and not ask questions. Enough funding and bonuses to look away from the journalist and forget they ever saw her when the time came.

Which was why it was so terribly disappointing to learn that, after over a week, Girdas' associate whom he met with had nothing important to tell him.

The thought of leaving their uneventful meeting, dramatic and cloak-and-dagger as it was, with the woman's liver or kidneys was almost too tempting to resist. At least he would have something to show for such a waste of his time and resources. By the time he finished his business for the day, evening had already settled over the bustling cityscape. He was tired and hungry, upset at yet more disappointments. Something stronger than wine was called for when he got home.

Hannibal returned to find a warm house, brightly lit against the autumn night. As soon as he stepped through the door, scents from the kitchen tempted him into investigating. His stomach rumbled with hunger after going so long without. He really should have taken those kidneys. All thoughts of pies and stews faded when he made it to the kitchen's threshold.

He hadn't been noticed so he took advantage and watched for as long as he could. Will's phone was set off to the side of the small breakfast table, playing old American music. Something slow and sad. A waltz of heartbreak. Completely at odds with the image Will made. Finally, Will saw him and he smiled as Hannibal left the doorway to come close enough to slide his arms around Will's waist.

Hannibal gave the two covered pots on the stove a curious glance over Will's shoulder as they bubbled away, before he kissed his cheek. “You've made dinner.” It smelled of spicy heat and something briny.

“Étouffée.” Will took the lid off one pot to give the contents a few stirs before he reduced the heat. “Of course, I couldn't find crawfish, but I got a hold of Andre and he was able to point me in the direction of a suitable substitute—and a fishmonger he trusts.”

Hannibal smiled after he took a closer look. “Langostino tails.”

“This is finished. Just waiting on the rice.”

Hannibal pulled Will away from the stove and into a loose embrace. He sighed at the taste of cayenne and paprika on Will's lips. Will cooked for him, again. Something from his past, though Hannibal wasn't supposed to know that much about it. It was thoughtful and lovely and everything he needed at the moment. Will looked him over, smoothing the wrinkles of his shirt and tugging on his tie.

“Everything all right?”

Hannibal looked him over and found himself stalling to answer. He had the strangest urge to tell Will everything. Confess to all the machinations he worked in the shadows. If only to persuade Will to join him. He lifted one of Will's hands to kiss, inhaling the scent of freshly minced garlic. The need to tell Will he loved him was almost overwhelming.

Instead, he led Will into a dance to the sorrowful crooner in the song spilling from the phone's speaker and said against his temple, “Everything is fine. You have made the failures of the day inconsequential.”

Will fell into step, resting his head on Hannibal's shoulder. “Good.” Hannibal could hear the smile in his voice. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving. I haven't had a bite all day.”

* * * * *

The day Will left, the day their relationship evolved into the inevitable, Will returned to him changed. A subtle, near-undetectable difference. It took Hannibal a few days to realize what that change was, distracted as he was by Will's charms, but when he did his happiness reached depths Hannibal had never known. Whatever happened to Will, whatever affairs he saw to, he came back with the full intention of committing to life as a Lecter.

Katinka's father. Son-in-law to Robertus and Murasaki. Brother to Mischa. And to Hannibal...Will allowed himself to begin acknowledging what started growing between them the moment his blackened eyes opened and found Hannibal at his hospital bedside. This life demanded he play so many roles and Hannibal delighted in watching Will take to them all with the ease of a natural mimic. A true chameleon.

Will chose their life and Hannibal took advantage of his decision as often as he could.

It didn't take much cajoling for Will to accompany him to a performance of The Gambler. Not his first choice in opera, but it would do for what Hannibal had in mind. He took Will around the theatre before the show began and found himself awestruck once again by his companion. Will didn't like crowds, seeing and feeling too much from those around him to ever be at ease. He despised the shallowness and frippery of the wealthy. His humble and skint beginnings gave him an outlook and understanding of the world that the so-called elite could never wrap their fragile minds around.

Yet, here Will was. In a classic tuxedo, hanging off Hannibal's arm like a priceless, glittering ornament. So very different from the rugged young man who left their bed early that morning because he refused to buy firewood and insisted on searching for a location suitable to chop it himself. Perfectly playing his part of Dr. Hannibal Lecter's beautiful inamorato.

As much as Will's forte was blending in, passing through life unassuming and unremarkable, he was unfortunately born with naturally striking features. If he desired, Will could be almost overwhelming with just his looks. And then he opened his mouth and out came anything from psychological philosophy to poetry to advice on the best fishing techniques to even on

one occasion Jim Morrison. It became clear that not only was Will terribly physically attractive, but he was equipped with a complex and incredible mind. Armed with a wit that could eviscerate the unlucky.

They made an impressionable pair.

During Intermission, Hannibal leaned close with his arm around Will's waist before those of high society swooped in to vie for his attention. “Have you enjoyed the performance so far?”

Will laughed and gave him one of his *looks*. “When you asked me out to the theatre, vague on the details as you were, I can't say that I expected an operatic adaptation of a Dostoyevsky novel.”

Hannibal's answering smile was lost in Will's curls. “I like to keep you guessing.”

Will leaned into his touch as Hannibal nuzzled along his ear, even as he watched the crowd around them with focused study. “Are you keeping them guessing?”

“Always.”

“Not about me. Are you sure you want to be so publicly forward with your brother-in-law?” The tease of his smile faded into something thoughtful. “This won't harm your reputation, your budding practice?”

Hannibal chuckled and turned Will to face him. “And how could they harm me? Petty gossip? Scandalized blathering, dribbling from the mouths of plaster saints? They wouldn't dare.” He leaned closer, entirely too close for a public setting. His words were only for Will. “They are nothing to concern yourself with. Anyone foolish enough to insult you, threaten me—that's just asking for their tongues to be gobbled up.”

Will's shocked laughter was an addictive sound and it drew a few covetous looks from other theatre-goers. He put his hand on Hannibal's arm in a friendly squeeze in lieu of a more intimate gesture. “I have a recipe for that.”

“I would love nothing more than for you to demonstrate it.”

“Maybe I will. The trick is in the quality of your cast iron skillet.”

Any more flirtatious talk of cookery was unfortunately interrupted by a few of Hannibal's acquaintances who spotted him in the crowd. He mingled and made introductions. Will stayed quiet unless he absolutely had to join in the conversation. By the time a small group surrounded them, Will slipped out of his hold with the excuse of getting them a drink from the bar.

And it was in that moment that everything Hannibal had worked towards, all his subtle pushing and pulling, came to fruition. In the span of seconds, everything began to fall into place. Exactly as he imagined. Through the group of admirers and friends, he watched Freddie Lounds approach Will Graham. She really was a striking woman. Her affinity for the color red was both style and calling card, he saw. Will was so engrossed in his phone, most

likely checking on Mischa and Katinka for the umpteenth time, that he didn't notice the beautiful woman in the flame red evening gown taking the stool at the bar beside him.

Hannibal didn't wait for Will to catch on. He smiled and made excuses, politely extricating himself from their company to find a quiet corner. In seconds a text was written and sent. From his vantage point, he could see a now agitated Will lead Ms. Lounds to a more private setting. His phone vibrated from within his breast pocket.

“Hello?”

“I am an associate of Girdas'. You don't know me, and we will never meet face to face. As requested by my employer, I have kept close. Has the target followed you into the theatre, Dr. Lecter?”

The voice was soft, firm as smoke and impossible to determine gender. Hannibal's smile grew, appreciating the equal amounts of theatrics and professionalism. “Yes. She is with Will, as we speak. Follow her, keep an eye on her. Text me the address of where she is staying. Walk away when I get there. You will receive triple what I agreed to pay Girdas, plus a bonus. For your thoroughness, and discretion.”

“Consider it done.”

Hannibal hung up and returned to the chattering and boisterous crowd, as if he had never left. He took his time between one Act and the next to look over the posters of upcoming and past performances. The thought of asking Will to join him again, other nights that they would enjoy together, filled him with a strange kind of giddiness.

When Will returned to him, requested drink in hand, he was much changed from when he went off to the bar. Though, he masterfully hid his distress. Hannibal could feel his misery, like a cloud enshrouding him. Every passing second it grew thicker. But Hannibal smiled and laughed, shared jokes with Will as the meaningless crowd gathered once more around them.

In their private box, Hannibal kept Will close. Half his attention on the performance, on the pleasure the music brought him, and the other half stayed firmly on Will. Will was happy even as he emitted heartbreak. Whatever Ms. Lounds said devastated him. Gone was the easy humor and affectionate joy of not even an hour before. Hannibal took up his hand, tracing lines against his wrist and delighting in every smile teased from his lips, every kiss stolen in the dark of the theatre.

Hannibal basked in Will's presence as he planned an ending suitable for the svelte little Duroc that made his lover so unhappy.

Chapter End Notes

A few things.

First, in case you're wondering about Hannibal's "Duroc" comment; a duroc is a red-haired pig that is one of the popular breeds of livestock in America.

Second, I hope you all don't mind another delve into the domestic side of Hannibal and Will's relationship. I hope it doesn't feel like a pause in the plot and not boring you all out of your gourds. I wanted to show Hannibal's side of events without being too repetitious. I also hope I succeeded in showing you what all Hannibal was scheming, even as he established a life with Will and Katinka. If any of this was confusing or you have questions, please feel free to drop me a line. :D

Third, in case any of you were wondering, Will was listening to old Country music. Patsy Cline, to be exact. He and Hannibal danced to The Tennessee Waltz. It's an interesting song. An oldie but a goodie. :D

And finally, you may have noticed that there are more sex scenes here than in Mr. Lecter. That's because of a few reasons. One: I tried to keep Mr. Lecter as close as possible to the overall vibe of Mrs. Winterbourne. There are no sex scenes in that movie. Two: To me, Hannibal is a very sensual character. I think everything he does is heightened, stylized, and has more than one meaning to his actions. Including sex. Usually, it's a means to an end, another manipulation and game. There are some elements of that to his interactions with Will, but there is so much more going on there that I want to explore—without it being just another boring explicit scene. :) I hope I'm getting that across and not boring you all to tears. Three: Believe it or not, some of these new scenes were things I thought of and even wrote out while working on Mr. Lecter. They just didn't fit in the overall storyline I had created for it and cut them. What's been so fun about this story is that I get to include some of what was going on off to the side, now that I'm writing what Hannibal focused on. I hope you all like what's developing.

Thanks for stopping by. I hope anyone who gave this chapter a whirl enjoyed it. Please stay safe, sane, healthy and WARM, dear readers! See you Thursday!

~CReed

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! Sorry for the delay with this. I spent last week mostly tinkering with it and debating on where to end the chapter. I hope it doesn't read like a clunky mess. I quite like how it turned out, but that might just be me. I hope you all like what I've done. ;) Before I end things here, I just want to thank Stralovat, EmilyElm, Welcome2the_Goondocks and Imanerdandliketoread for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments. You all are always so kind and thoughtful and I appreciate hearing from you. :D

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fourteen

The rest of their evening, the first date of many to come he promised himself, was pleasant enough. It had to end earlier than he would have liked, but he was now working within a delicate time frame. Will seemed to be as well. By the time Hannibal was given everything he asked for regarding his latest prey, they both were ready to draw their outing to a close. Will was eager for Hannibal to leave just as much as he was eager to leave Will. A shame. Something too close to guilt sat heavy and oily in his gut and he did not care for such a feeling.

This would be the last time either man hunted solo.

With a perfectly timed phone call from his mysterious associate, Hannibal left Will with an excuse he wouldn't question. Hannibal was still a doctor, after all. One never knew when he was expected to drop everything for whatever medical emergencies the hospital was having. Will understood his obligations and sent him off with a sweet kiss.

Hannibal took in his destination and its surroundings after a thirty-minute drive led him to a motel in the middle of the city. He looked over where the address bid him go from across the street and down a block or so and smiled. It couldn't be denied that Ms. Lounds was enterprising as much as she was cautious. Normally, the motel would be a great place to set up a base of operation for one such as herself. A busy section of the city. Someone was bound to be out and about day or night.

Freddie Lounds was used to evading enemies.

However crafty she was, the traffic around the area giving her some form of protection, she had essentially sealed her fate the moment she began working outside of the boundaries of the law. The threat of passers-by witnessing anything untoward would only stop those who

lacked finesse, afraid of a challenge. They would be stopped by the potential of prying eyes, the fully-lit parking lot and staffed office that was open throughout the night.

Hannibal looked at Ms. Lounds' hideaway and saw the lack of cameras on the building and surrounding businesses. Most definitely a purposeful choice she made, as it gave her a means to deny she was ever here if Will, or anyone else, accused her. The room she stayed in was on the ground floor, on the southern side of the establishment. A quiet, darkened area that was easy to slip in and out of. Convenient for her, but also for him. She was paid through the week under an alias. Another point in his favor. Ms. Lounds was so confident in herself, in whatever paltry defenses she might have, that she didn't honestly consider the danger she could find herself.

Protected by a pig's money and used to her own cunning, she wouldn't even think to ensure safeguards from the likes of him.

Hannibal double-checked that he had everything he needed on his person before putting his car in drive and sped around to the back of the motel. He hurried across the parking lot to door number 19. His knock was fast and loud and it took a few sets of desperate rapping for the door to crack open, chain lock in place. Suspicious blue eyes widened with recognition at the sight of him from the darkness beyond. He almost smiled at the thought of his prey concealing a weapon behind the door in expectation of a threat only to let her guard down for harmless Dr. Lecter.

“Are you Freddie Lounds?” The pleading question was in perfect English, words clipped and hasty in their distress.

Tight red curls bounced around her fair face as she shook her head. “I'm sorry, you have the wrong person. Maybe try the front office.”

Hannibal slapped a frantic hand against the flimsy particle board door before she could close it in his face. “Wait! Please, Ms. Lounds. I need your help.”

“I'm sorry, sir. I don't—”

“Charlie Countryman gave me your contact information!” Hannibal yelled through the dwindling space between the door and frame. A chilly wind picked up, ruffling the hair at the back of his head. Thunder rumbled in the distance. “I have no one else to turn to.”

A look of annoyance flashed across her face, there and gone in the shadows of her room. She sighed and closed the door, lock unfastening, before holding it open for him. Hannibal came to stand in the middle of what she called home for the last few weeks. Clothes and sundries in piles. Electronics plugged in and ready for use. The door clicked shut and he turned to face her, stiffening in alarm at the sight of the small pistol in her grip.

She held it down at her side, casual and unconcerned. When she noticed his discomfort, she smiled and clicked the safety on. “I can't be too careful. I should have known he was following me. Mr. Countryman is a very mistrusting guy.”

Hannibal gave her a stilted nod, relaxing as she tucked the gun back into the purse on the table near the door. “Ms. Lounds, I'm H—”

“I know who you are, Dr. Lecter, though I never expected to meet you in person. I was hoping to wrap this all up as painlessly as possible. Without involving you. I'm sure Charlie told you many disturbing things.” Her concern was only sincere enough to get him to open up, trust her.

“He mistook me for my brother.” Hannibal swallowed against the pain of rehashed trauma.

She nodded and sat on the tattered loveseat. “I'm sorry you had to go through that, in your time of loss. Charlie couldn't accept that your brother was killed, or Gabi.” She was testing him, gauging his reactions.

Hannibal slumped into the chair across from her, burying his face in his hands. “Gabi...Whatever Charlie was to my brother, to—*he's lying*. There has to be some mistake.” When Lounds only made a questioning kind of hum, Hannibal looked up with tears gathering along his lashes. “Gabriel would never lie to us. He would never hurt us.”

Lounds perked up at that, at the uncertainty in his shaky voice. She leaned forward, excitement in her striking eyes. A clear, arctic blue. Lighter than Will's. “So, that's how he escaped from the hospital. Of course.” She laughed to herself, incredulous at the pieces she was putting together. “That's not Gabriel. There is no 'Gabriel.' I'm sorry, but a very dangerous man found his way into your home.” She wasn't sorry. She was giddy with the idea of such a sordid tale.

Hannibal shook his head, sniffling as he refused to believe her. “No.”

Lounds leaned back and tried to curb her smile. “He's very good at what he does, Dr. Lecter.”

“*No*.”

She barreled through his heartbroken denials, relishing being the one to unveil the ugly truth. “Will Graham has a very unique talent. He can become anyone. Anyone you want him to be. It's how he survives, destroying one life after another but always coming out unscathed.”

“You're wrong.” Hannibal swiped a tear from his cheek.

Lounds watched him from where she sat reclined against stiff cushions and water-stained fabric. Her expression was that of a concerned bleeding heart, but there was a glint to her eyes, a subtle smirk to plush lips. She was enjoying this, the one with the information, the one who had the power. The one who would leave his glamorous life in shambles. She looked him over, taking in the tuxedo he wore to the theatre, the glimmer of his watch and the redness of his eyes, before she stood to rifle through the detritus on her nightstand.

“Something's changed. If you were so sure of Charlie lying, you wouldn't have bothered coming here. Will did something, didn't he?”

“*He's* changed.” Hannibal's breath shook as he gathered his thoughts. “Of course, I know there will be differences to his behavior as he heals, grows use to us all. This isn't that.”

“Has he hurt you, or your family? Did he harm Nigel's daughter?”

Hannibal bristled at the insinuation, at the idea that Will would touch Katinka in any way other than loving devotion. “Gabriel would never hurt her.”

“You have no idea what he's capable of.” Lounds turned back to him, leather portfolio in her hands. She opened the cover and woke up her tablet, accessing files and apps on the bright screen before passing it over. “You and your family are not the first he's targeted.”

Lounds mistook his gasp for horror when really all Hannibal could feel was an intense kind of awe. So different from the photos his associates were able to find. He had only been given pictures of the aftermath. A chronicle of healed flesh and fresh skin graphs. Watered down for mass consumption, so as not to disturb polite society. These were completely different. They were breathtaking. Raw and unfiltered. Likely belonging to the initial police report, though Hannibal would have displayed them in the most highly esteemed gallery. What Will orchestrated for Mason Verger transcended artistry. Beauty in its most primal form.

The soft, pampered skin of Verger's face was almost completely removed. Not by a precise and expert hand. A sharp and steady blade was not the tool used for this macabre procedure. Ripped off. The mask of good breeding and pedigree, the disguise made from money and power, torn away to reveal the truth of the monster lurking beneath. Not by Will's hand, or any weapon he could have wielded, but by greedy teeth and smacking lips. A feast for pigs.

This was Will's design, in all it's unfettered glory.

Hannibal covered his mouth with his hand to hide the proud smile that teased the edges of his lips. He held out the tablet for her to take away. “What is this? Why would show me such a thing?”

“That is Mason Verger, Dr. Lecter. Heir to the Verger family meatpacking dynasty. One of the richest, most powerful, families in the United States. This is his twin sister, Margot. Will Graham seduced and isolated Mr. Verger's sister, who was already vulnerable from her many mental illnesses. Mason tried to stop Will from further damaging Margot, but it was already too late. Will broke into the Verger's home one night and attacked Mason. He left him for dead, in the man's pig pens. After robbing them and abducting Margot.”

Lounds flicked past several gruesome pictures documenting Mason's suffering until she found a glamorous photo of the lovely Margot. A few swipes of her dainty finger showed him a quick slideshow of Margot in various settings, some professional and some casual caught by paparazzi. Pictures of an All-American family, rich and untouchable. Marketed to appeal to the lower-class masses. But Hannibal saw the cruelty in the eyes of the father and brother, the cold apathy in the mother's, the fear and sorrow in the sister's. What demons roamed the fields of such a friendly family's farm? The pictures changed, shifting to grainy video stills and photos taken from afar. Margot was having trysts with someone she did not want her family to know about. Secret rendezvous with a man her brother didn't approve of.

Hannibal knew who it was, even with the poor quality of the picture. He had spent precious time memorizing every line of him, every curve and contour. Another picture came onto the screen. A blown-up, pixelated mess of the previous shot but the subject of the gaze was unmistakable. Hannibal made a show of flinching at the captured moment between Will and Margot, heads bowed close in soft-spoken conspiracies. Before he could study the figures, the picture was replaced by another. A wanted flier, spattered with information and the photo lifted from a work ID.

“Will Graham,” Lounds repeated. “Not Gabriel, Aiden or whoever else he's pretended to be. He's dangerous, Dr. Lecter. Deranged. An opportunistic murderer with a hunger for the wealthy and vulnerable.”

Hannibal couldn't help scoffing. “So, what? You think Gabriel, the man who has been living under my roof harmlessly for weeks, who loves my niece like she's his own—the man that I care very deeply for—had *this* in mind the whole time? All this for money?”

Lounds shrugged, satisfied smile teasing at the edges of her mouth. “I don't think this was his plan, no. But perhaps he caught the eye of your brother, or Gabriela's? Apparently, Nigel and his wife were quite estranged. Affairs were common between the two. Will could easily become the paramour either one of them would want. Perhaps they shared him. Either way, he was close enough to them to be trusted with their infant daughter.”

“That is a lot of speculation, Ms. Lounds.” The displeasure Hannibal felt at the baseless accusations roughened his voice that she mistook for tears. “A lot to build theories on, with just the word from Mr. Verger. Where is Margot in all this?”

“Her body was never found. Whatever happened to her, Will didn't enter Romania with her.”

Hannibal kept his gaze averted, stifling the urge to laugh. A twisted tale of greed and insanity for insanity's sake, with Will at the center as a glorified thief who chose his targets indiscriminately. It was a weak story that he could tell Lounds didn't believe, even as she attempted to push the lies down his throat. Judging from her interest in the bounty put in place by Mason Verger, she knew the truth, or at least doubted the official narrative, but didn't care. For Will or Margot. For Nigel or Gabi. For him. They were all expendable, interchangeable in their unnecessary statuses.

He couldn't tell if she really believed Will was such a boring, common criminal. For a journalist, she was easily led astray by her bias. At this point, it mattered little. If this had all worked out in her favor, she would never have had to depend on her terrible reporting skills ever again.

“Is Mr. Verger alive?”

Lounds seemed surprised by the question and returned to the loveseat. “Yes. He stays on his family's property. A recluse, terrified that Will might return to finish him off.”

Not terrified enough. Before Hannibal could extract any further useful information from Lounds, her phone rang. Her posture stiffened, expression that of someone who was caught with their hand in the proverbial cookie jar. She sighed as she accepted the call, avoiding

making eye contact with him all the while. Hannibal smiled as she fidgeted, uncomfortable at being discovered but not repentant enough to change her current course. Whatever risk there was to Hannibal overhearing her conversation, it didn't outweigh her need to answer.

“Will.”

Warmth curled in his gut at the name. He listened to their exchange with growing humor. The sound of Will's voice, a purr of curt and teasing words, was soothing after such unpleasant company. It cut through the static of the connection with perfect clarity. Hannibal heard Will's side without the aide of a speaker. Though Lounds did her best to muffle his words, Hannibal could hear every one of Will's demands.

They were solidifying plans that must have started in motion at the theatre. Ms. Lounds, crusader of Mason Verger's just cause, was blackmailing Will. No doubt a substantial amount if it could turn her gluttonous gaze from Mason's promised three million dollars. A paltry sum to draw from the Lecters' savings. Pocket change they would never notice missing, she would reason. How terribly banal.

Will was ready to give her what she wanted, but refused to meet her. She'd have to come to him for her riches. An obvious trap, perhaps. Especially for someone who previously researched killers and their modus operandi for a living. However, the bait was too tempting for her to ignore. As Will was counting on. In a series of events that placed Will at the mercy of so many who would see him dead, he gained the upper hand by using their appetites against them. Finally, he was drawing them out to be caught one by one. Good boy.

Will planned to kill her, the first of many to come. A shame the opportunity had to be taken from him. Hannibal would have loved to watch him work.

“Don't try anything, Will.” Lounds ended the call with a warning Will barely acknowledged, smug as she finally looked to her guest. She waved the phone in Hannibal's direction. “That was *Gabriel*, Dr. Lecter. I confronted him earlier about his schemes and he wants to make a deal. Ready to pay for my silence with money from your family's accounts.”

As if without her meddling Will would have robbed the Lecters blind at the first chance he had. As if the threat of the man hunting him didn't have an impact on Will's decision. “And are you planning on collecting, Ms. Lounds?”

“Of course not. I plan to catch him red-handed, let the authorities take over. Would you like to come with me?”

Lies upon lies and an offer that hid sharp teeth. His interest spiked and he smiled at such a display of opportunistic cunning. Just what was Ms. Lounds planning now? Hannibal wiped what tears remained away and took his time straightening his gloves and coat. “I don't know if that's a good idea. Shouldn't you call the police and tell them where he is?”

“I have to wait for him to text me his location.” Lounds smiled when her phone chimed. “That'll be him.” Hannibal watched as she unlocked her phone, taking care to follow the pattern she swiped across the screen. A simple puzzle that wouldn't give him trouble. She fiddled with her phone as she went to her purse. “I'll call the police on my way there. Are you

sure you won't change your mind about joining me, Doctor? Your side of the story will help convince the authorities of how dangerous Will is."

Lounds was so preoccupied with slipping her phone in her purse and looking for the gun that fell to the bottom amongst the rest of the clutter that she didn't notice when he stood, all traces of anguish vanishing from one calm heartbeat to the next. In a few quick, silent strides he stood behind her to wrap one hand around her throat. He caught her arms and pinned them against her chest when she reached up to gouge out his eyes or scratch his face. Of course, it would be beneficial for anyone in her previous line of work to learn a few lessons in self defense and she seemed to remember what she was taught. Unfortunately, her training would do her no good against him.

He shushed her as she struggled, soothing her as he did every other frightened animal he caught. With each kick he dodged and spasm of her body he contained, he counted the seconds of air he cut off from her. She needn't be unconscious for this. In fact, he preferred she be awake a little while yet. Just before she blacked out, Hannibal released his choking grip. While Ms. Lounds coughed and gasped for ragged breaths, Hannibal dragged her to the bed. He laid her out in a comfortable position, straightening the pillow beneath her head.

Hannibal uncapped the filled syringe from his pocket and prepared the shot. A cocktail of paralytics, stimulants and sedatives. Nothing too harsh that would damage meat and organs beyond use. He pushed the layers of her coat and blouse up to expose the creamy expanse of her arm. Hannibal once again found himself admiring the build and delicate proportions of her form as he slowly pressed the plunger to distribute the drugs gently into her vein.

"Let that circulate," he said as he checked her pulse, patting her hand before leaving her side.

He grabbed the gun she fumbled to the floor and tossed it back into her bag. Her phone was safe inside one of the many pockets and he smiled when it unlocked with a few simple lines swiped across the combination grid. Will's text wasn't hard to find and Hannibal memorized the address. Another thread caught his eye and he couldn't help snooping further. There were no names for the numbers but it wasn't difficult to deduce that the correspondence he skimmed through was between Freddie Lounds and her current employer.

"Mr. Verger was in Romania, last he told you. A bit late for that, wouldn't you say? I suppose he moved on since this text, but I doubt you would have been inspired to such boldness had he been in the country." Lounds didn't respond, of course. He didn't need her to. It was enough she was there to bounce ideas off of. "If only you had kept in better contact. That was rather rude of you."

She started as a loyal worker, checking in with Mason in a prompt and regular manner to report her findings. However, a few months ago she became vague in every message, the time between each one growing until she barely bothered. Most likely around the time she found Will and decided to watch him instead of finishing her job. Plans of blackmail rather than hunting developed in her enterprising head. A grand scheme that would make her rich and leave her unscathed from all sides she played. The latest text to Mason had yet to be sent, timed for two hours from then.

He chuckled when he saw the contents of the message and looked over his shoulder at the woman slumped across cheap sheets. “You are wonderfully naughty, Ms. Lounds.” Will's location. A picture of Hannibal attached, his name and any information she was able to find on him; including details of his relationship with Will. The picture was taken recently, on one of the days he wandered about the city, hoping to be noticed.

Curiosity got the better of him and he looked through the other pictures on her phone. He wasn't disappointed. None from the hospital or when they sought respite in the country. She hadn't found them yet. There was one or two from the day she spied Will at the various shops Hannibal went to before his dinner party. One faraway shot of Will's solemn form at the pier. The day that changed everything between them.

As he swiped through the photos, Hannibal couldn't help the satisfaction that swelled inside him. His plan worked even more perfectly than he imagined. Several more pictures were of he and Will as they explored their new environment. A series of shots captured his attention more than the others and he smiled when he thought of the weekend they were taken. Hannibal had succeeded in persuading Will to let Mischa have Katinka for a few days. Just the two of them. The first time they were truly alone with one another.

Freddie Lounds followed them all the way to Vilnius, to the hotel they stayed in.

The first photo showcased an evening they dined out. The softly lit area of the restaurant was empty aside from them. They sat close with the their heads bowed together in intimate conversation. Then, there were a few photos of the couple leaving the table, walking close down the bustling streets back to their room, in the stylish hotel lobby and then waiting for an elevator. The final picture in the sequence was right as the lift doors slid shut. A perfect shot of Hannibal crowding Will against the mirrored wall, stealing kisses and uncaring of propriety. And Will...Healed and pampered and under Hannibal's care for weeks by then, he looked especially lovely. A siren. Temptation incarnate.

Hannibal selected the entire Gallery folder's contents to send to his phone, before attaching them to the message waiting to be sent to Mr. Verger. He edited the text to his liking as he stepped out to his car to retrieve what he needed. When he returned, he gathered up the important things amongst Ms. Lounds' belongings to pack in a suitcase he found in the closet. Her toiletries would be left behind, unimportant scraps for the cleaning service to find after she moved on. Just another forgetful tourist. A stray blouse. Some earbuds lost in a drawer. Nothing to trace. No one to find.

“If it wasn't such a gross invasion of our privacy, I would commend you for your excellent eye for photography,” Hannibal told the semi-conscious form sprawled on the mattress as he began the task of removing her heavy platform boots. He tossed them aside and moved on to her frilly velvet jacket. “As it stands, I am finding it difficult to not just take your prying eyes and throw the rest of you in the nearest dumpster.”

Her clothing and jewelry made a sizable pile that he shoved into the trash bag he brought. The purse and wallet followed and Hannibal smiled at the gun that tumbled uselessly into the folds of all the satin and lace.

“Judging by the picture and the contents of what would have been your last message, you had no scruples in giving Mr. Verger my information or my face to go with it. Were you going to keep your gun on me the entire trip to Will, or was your plan to knock me out with it and stuff me in your trunk? Or perhaps you planned to keep me compliant with threats to my remaining family? The method hardly matters, I suppose. As long as the end result was achieved: tying up any loose ends.” Hannibal dragged the large duffle bag closer to the bed. He knelt beside the lumpy mattress and smoothed her hair back, counting the beats in the fluttering pulse at her neck. “Will and I would have dealt with Mason in our own time, and you need never concerned yourself. If you had just left Will alone, I never would have called on you, Ms. Lounds.” His words came out a rumbling growl that didn't completely conceal the rage he felt. He smiled as her pulse spiked.

Freddie Lounds' drooping gaze flitted from his face to the cleared space of the motel room to the bag that gaped open on the floor.

“I hate to rush the time we have together, Ms. Lounds, but I'm afraid we don't have a second to spare.” He slipped his arms beneath her shoulders and knees to lift her. Such a slight thing. Without layers of ostentatious fashion and shoes that loaned her an extra ten pounds—at least—she couldn't have weighed much over one hundred pounds. Her head lolled against his shoulder and he smiled at the look she gave the bag. “You're very astute. I imagine that helped with your previous job, and I do feel terrible for depriving your readers of further tawdry tales you may have told them, but victims of inevitability we all are.”

Hannibal lowered her into the bag, only having to make a few adjustments to her position, before zipping it closed. He gave the room one last painstaking look around. It was as it should be: a room a young woman checked out of after finishing her business. With his collar up to protect against the chill, he grabbed her bags of belongings and the duffle on his way to the car. If anyone happened to see, they would only notice a man taking his baggage to his trunk before driving away.

As it was, the gathering storm kept everyone in, uncaring of business not their own.

* * * * *

Hannibal didn't waste time showering. He didn't have to. The ritual of preparing a body was something he had done so often, perfected, over the years that he was barely sullied by any stray drops of blood. However, his evening wear was fed to the incinerator in the spirit of practicality. A shame as he rather liked those Testoni shoes, but they were a sacrifice he could live with. He would never forgive himself if he was betrayed by good taste.

It was all ash and dust by now.

The wily journalist turned bounty hunter turned extortionist would be kept to drain in the chilly basement of the farmhouse he owned outside of the city proper. Under one of his many aliases, no one had yet to connect the property to him. She would keep well there. No risk of spoiling in the amount of time he planned to be away.

Arriving at the motel, the impromptu interrogation, some cleaning and stage-setting, one small abduction, followed by a country drive to a private property where he began the

process of butchering a slip of a pig and now he was on his way to collect Will—it all took less than two hours. Not a personal record, but still impressive by anyone's standards. And the night had only just started. It was with excitement thrumming through his veins and a waltz hummed quietly as he drove that Hannibal hurried home as fast as legally possible. In just a few more hours, he would have his quarry.

Soon, this would all be over.

Indemnifies would be paid. The dead would rest. He and Will would be free.

He pulled up to a darkened house. The street was quiet and empty. One light left to burn next door. Deafening silence met him as he came into the foyer. Just a few more steps forward and angry, nervous barking rose up, muffled behind the garage door. He smiled and opened the door, kneeling when Mira recognized him for one of her pack and not an intruder.

“Hello, vicious girl.” He messaged her ears as he looked around. More than enough food to last well-through the night and plenty of water. Just in case she stayed locked up for a while. “How long have you been left alone, hm?” He stood, and with a command Will often used, Mira trotter after him to be let into the backyard.

On his way back through the living room, he noticed the lamp on at the desk tucked into the corner. Of course he would. Will counted on his observant nature, his attention to detail. In the pool of soft light were a few sheets of loose paper. Fine quality stock. Cream stationery with fresh black ink scrolled across the length of it. Will's handwriting. Words left for him in place of the man. Hannibal didn't want to read them.

He took the letter with him as he made his way upstairs, reading as he found one empty room after another.

Hannibal,

I wish there was a gentler way to do this. So many times I wanted to confess everything to you. Come clean. Be absolved for the harm I've caused you and your family. But absolution calls for those who have been wronged to forgive, and I can't be forgiven. I would never beg you for your forgiveness, even if I could obtain it. I deserve your hate and your blame. I will take every ounce of it. Anything and everything you would give me I would gladly keep and treasure, even your disdain.

I need you to know that the last few weeks have meant more to me than I could ever put to words. Being with Katinka and Nigel's family filled a place inside me that I never even realized was empty. I would die for her. Kill for her. Her safety and happiness are my first priority and that will never change.

In a few moments more you won't believe me, but I want you to know that I have never loved someone as I love you.

I have never known myself better than when I'm with you. You make everything clear. All the ugly, terrible parts of myself seem so radiant when I'm with you. The things you inspire in me, I wonder if they would appall you? I have a feeling they wouldn't. The things I would have

shared with you. I was going to. Whatever happens now, I was going to tell you everything. But I ran out of time, Hannibal, and it's all spiraled too far out of control.

Perhaps it's a blessing that you'll be rid of me.

I have lied to you this whole time, Hannibal. To you and your brilliant family. I am not who you thought I was. My whole existence that you let in, that you allowed close enough to see your exquisite and jagged edges, is a fraud. Gabriel Lecter doesn't exist. He never did. It is because of me that Nigel was killed. Collateral damage. I am going to make this right. As much as I can. When the time comes, and the authorities are no longer holding your brother's remains hostage, please look up Gabriela as one of the missing in the crash. She deserves to be laid to rest with Nigel. Gabi deserves to be honored and remembered as Katinka's mother, as much as Nigel is remembered as her father.

There really isn't more to say after that, is there? No more excuses and no more hiding behind my flimsy reasons. It doesn't matter that I'm sorry. It doesn't matter that I tried to be honest in every way else that I could. Believe me, this is for the best. You deserve something beautiful and terrifying and as dangerous and wonderful as you. Not me.

Don't try to find me. Don't look for me. Don't waste your time wondering where I am, or what I'm doing. Don't think about me.

Goodbye, Hannibal.

As much as he expected such an impetuous reaction from Will, had prepared for such a thing, it still hurt. Deeper than anyone or thing had ever managed to wound him. After everything they shared with one another, Will still didn't understand. Hannibal would remain at his side through anything, forgive anything. Even the part he believed he played in Nigel and Gabi's death.

Hannibal could admit that now. A hard truth he denied until faced with a possible future without Will. He could only hope that, wherever Nigel and his beloved were, they allowed him his terrible weakness. He read over Will's sorrowful confessions and beautiful admissions. Will loved him. To finally know, to have Will acknowledge what he felt for him, burdened Hannibal with a truth that Nigel would have to forgive him for. If Hannibal found in all his digging that Will was responsible for his twin's murder, he wouldn't have killed him. He couldn't. Maim him, hurt him, reduce him down to the level of pain he brought Hannibal's family, but not kill him. Will would be punished, worked into his blood-soaked and brutal vision, but Hannibal would keep Will forever. To do otherwise would be a form of suicide.

Hannibal almost hated that he loved the man so much. Will had the power to destroy him and Hannibal would never stop him if he honestly tried. However, *this* he would not allow. Misplaced guilt and sacrifice upon an alter that demanded the blood of someone else. Hannibal would have his pound of flesh, but it would not be Will's.

He read the letter over and another time once more. Every tragic word and sweet confession memorized before being cast into the fireplace. Hannibal watched them burn away, only continuing on with his tight schedule when he knew without a doubt that such a terrible document was reduced to ash. He finished up at his house, stowing Mira in the garage again

and stealing Will's forgotten scarf on the coat rack near the door, and then he made his way across the snowy lawn between the cottages.

Mischa ushered him inside, only a few seconds passing after he pressed the doorbell. He took in her silk pajamas and robe as she led him into the warm living room. “Forgive me for coming over so late. Were you sleeping?”

Mischa gave him an unimpressed look as she pulled him onto a couch. “Of course not. What are you doing over here, and not with your lovely Will? You know I'm quite capable of looking after a baby for a night. I'm fine, Katinka is fine.” In seconds her assessing, golden gaze swept over his boots and jeans, thick sweater and dark jacket. His gloves were high quality but worn with use. Rarely did she see him dressed in such a style. A hint in its own way of things to come. She took his face in her willowy hands, concern growing at whatever she found when she looked into his eyes. “What has happened?”

Hannibal took a steadying breath, preparing for her reaction, and kissed her palms before he pulled free. “The people responsible for Nigel have scared Will into running.” He calmed her before she could upset herself, “I know where he is. I will find him before they do.”

Mischa kept her eyes on their joined hands, brows furrowed in a line of worry and sorrow. “That's not all you're going to do, is it?”

“No, darling, it's not.” Rarely did Mischa involve herself in his habits, but he never felt the need to lie to her.

“You're going hunting? For those who hurt Nigel and Gabi?”

“Yes, and Will is going to help me.”

Mischa hugged him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders so tight he feared she would refuse to let him go. “Please be careful, Hannibal. I lost Nigel, I couldn't bear to lose you and Will too.”

Hannibal felt her tremble and pulled away to smile and wipe her tears away. “There is nothing to fear, dearest. Everything is going exactly the way I planned. I'll be fine. Will, stubborn and impossible as he is, will be fine too.” He stood and let her cling to his hand as he went to the door. “Keep Katinka until we get back. I'll call when it's over.”

“Come back safe.”

“I always do.”

Mischa kissed his cheek. “Return Will to us, where he belongs.”

“I will.” Hannibal smiled and stepped out into the night once again. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I've been waiting a long time to post this. This is what I envisioned happening from the beginning of Mr. Lecter. I hope you all liked it. For some reason, I have this idea of Hannibal morphing into whatever he needs to be to bring a person's guard down. Even when he's hunting. Especially when he's hunting. I think he can appear vulnerable as much as he can seem charming or cold, depending on his intended victim and how far along they are in being brought to his basement. :) Also, I just had a blast having Hannibal give off "I've never done nothing to nobody and have never done anything wrong in my life" vibes. Think the sad!dad, soft puppy man Mads Mikkelsen played in The Hunt and I think you'll catch the mood I was trying to set.

I hope this wasn't disappointing for everyone waiting to find out just what happened to Freddie. And I just want to give everyone reading a heads up that updates might be every two weeks or so. They'll always be on Thursdays though. I reached the part where I had everything written out, so it might be slower now. Sorry for the delay this week. I hope I didn't lose you all, but I understand if I did.

See you Thursday! In the meantime, please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

> I don't know how you all will feel about this chapter. It's, personally, one of my favorites so far. I'm sure you can guess where we are in the timeline. I hope you all enjoy it. Before I let you go, I just want to thank Stralovat, Welcome2the_Goondocks and EmilyElm for taking the time to leave me such wonderful comments last chapter. You always leave me such lovely, thoughtful comments and I really appreciate it. It makes me smile every time I see them in my inbox.
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen

The motel Will chose to stay in, receive Ms. Lounds at, was so out of the way that Hannibal was able to find a perfect place to drive off the road and park his car in a copse of alder and aspen trees without passers-by taking notice. Hard to see from the highway and, currently within the witching hour, impossible to spot. Hannibal killed the engine and triple-checked everything he needed for his impending encounter with Mr. Verger.

He doubted the man would come to collect them himself. Not after his last one-on-one encounter with Will. The coward preferred to keep his hands clean. Mason would send someone out for them. Experienced and thorough. Armed but with orders not to kill. They would check Will for weapons and perhaps transfer their meticulous attention to himself. Best to quietly surrender to his captors unarmed. After all, he was a pampered playboy surgeon. Completely harmless and at their mercy.

Hannibal walked the rest of the way. Along the bend of the road filled with gathering shadows, no other vehicles passed him. A lonely stretch of Lithuanian countryside. Far from the clamor of the city and not part of any sleepy town or hamlet. Run-down. Mostly abandoned. Perfect for what Will intended for this night.

The slight reprieve in the tumultuous weather ended halfway through his trek in the dark. Lightning forked across the blackened sky, a gust of frigid wind swept through the trees, and then the rain came. By the time he crossed the questionable establishment's parking lot and knocked on the door mentioned in Ms. Lounds' text, his hair was dripping and his coat was close to soaked through.

Shock didn't meet his arrival. No denials or clumsy excuses. Will didn't seem surprised at all to see him on his threshold. His lover opened the door and stepped back to let him in without a word. Hannibal didn't feel the need to fill the growing silence with useless platitudes and

instead turned to lock the door. There would be no interruptions. Not for what was about to happen. What had to happen. For Will's sake. For any kind of way forward for them.

Will immediately took in and noted Hannibal's clothes, his stance—every detail that informed him of the shift in his demeanor. Just as he catalogued the differences in the Will that stood before him and the one he left behind in the home they had created. Calm and cool, a kind of readiness coiling his body tight for any threats. Even if they came from Hannibal.

“I take it you read my note.”

Such a flat tone. As if Will was already thousands of miles from him. Detached to spare pain. For Hannibal or himself he couldn't tell and he found himself bristling. “I did. And then I burnt it.”

“Destroying possible evidence?” Hannibal smiled as he put his damp gloves in his pocket. He'd never heard Will in this way before. A certain brand of sass to incite anger from his opponent, to misdirect from his soft belly. But Hannibal knew just what he was trying to protect. He'd read those terrible, lovely, *cruel* words over and over enough to know just how much of a weakness Will Graham had for him. He waited just a bit longer, not reacting in anger or hurt, and was rewarded with the crumbling of Will's resolve. “You were supposed to let me go.”

“I can't do that. Too many people would miss you.” He took a step closer.

It was a jab he couldn't help taking and Will's smile was a small, sad tremor at the reminder of what he was considering leaving behind. “Where's Bell and Mischa?” Will didn't retreat from Hannibal's slow stalk across the threadbare carpet.

“Still sleeping, I should think. Come home.” They were close enough to touch but Hannibal didn't in fear of spooking his prize.

“I can't. You know I can't.”

Will still didn't see. Not yet. “You are always overthinking. Whatever you are allowing to cloud your thoughts now, stop. I can help.” Hannibal could resist no longer and reached for Will, nuzzling gentle touches along his hairline. His scent was feverish and metallic with anxiety. “Let me help you, once more.”

Even as he shook his head to deny him, Will leaned into Hannibal for comfort. “How can you still want me, knowing what I did to you and your family?”

“It is rather inconvenient, the feelings you invoke and inspire in me. However, I cannot place blame entirely at your feet. And I can still want you very easily. In your own way, you've always told me the truth, just as I have done for you.”

“There's more than that. So much more you don't know. I have so much blood on my hands. I'm drowning in it.”

“What happened to Nigel and Gabi isn't your fault.”

Will stiffened in surprise for a moment and laughed. An ugly, self-deprecating sound. “I'm not talking about them, Dr. Lecter. I've killed people other than those innocent bystanders on that damned train. In a much more direct, hands-on way. In complete control of my mind and actions. It's not the same as what you did when you were a boy. It's not just survival for me. That excuse can only work to a certain point. I like it. I enjoy every opportunity I get to dole out punishment to those who deserve it. Doing bad things to bad people makes me feel good. And I'm not going to stop. In fact, I'm going to do it again, very soon.”

Did Will think this would turn him away from his love? Will shook with his confession, tears sliding down his pale cheeks. He held the wet folds of Hannibal's coat in a tight grasp but refused to look him in the eye.

“Am I worth helping now, Hannibal? Am I worth keeping? Close to everyone you love? In your bed?”

The softly spoken questions broke Hannibal of his resolve to keep his hands to himself, to not crowd or overwhelm his determined little wolf. He wrapped Will in his arms and soothed him the best he could. Whenever Hannibal wanted to be angry at his lover, tried to remind himself of Will's reckless behavior, Will would surprise him. Always full of surprises. To hear him confess, from perfect lips such admissions of terribly wondrous urges, ignited in Hannibal a pleased contentment he had never known.

Hannibal pressed his cheek against Will's head, fingers petting and gentle as they slid through drying curls. “I was wondering when you would tell me. I hoped one day you would feel safe enough to share all those dark and lovely secrets, fluttering around inside your head like black butterflies. Of course I still want to help you.” He kissed where he last caressed, taking comfort in Will's scent mixed with rain and ozone. His heart ached for the frightened young man shaking in his hold. Will wouldn't have to be scared much longer. “I know it's hard. I know it hurts. But you need to trust me, Will.”

The smallest of gasps against Hannibal's throat and a tremulous wave that passed through Will were the only outward signs that he heard him. Heard and understood. Seconds stretched into a silent eternity that Hannibal happily waited out, untroubled with Will's warm weight against him. Will's hands came up between them, splayed against his chest. Their hearts slowed to beat in a synchronicity that brought tears to Hannibal's eyes.

Perfect unity. Complete cohesion. And Will chose to abandon such a connection. Will looked into his eyes and he saw everything. What Hannibal allowed and what he didn't. He always had and he always would. The hurt Will easily dealt, the pain Hannibal freely endured. He would never deny Will. Even accepting his fate, forgiving his indiscretions, Hannibal found himself reaching out to grip Will firmly by the neck.

His wolf understood the threat. A part of Will recognized the desire within Hannibal to demonstrate his capacity for violence. He made no move to stop him. Whatever Hannibal decided. Murder or mercy, it was his choice. Whatever Hannibal decided to do with the truth, Will surrendered to him. Hannibal smiled, delighting in the fact that he managed to surprise Will and ran his thumb absently along his jugular.

“Or do you prefer 'Aiden Teague?' Though, if you were to ask me, I like 'Will Graham' the best.”

It was fascinating to watch the shift in Will as he morphed from a scared and cornered thing into the calm beast held safe in the circle of Hannibal's arms. He fed off Hannibal's composure, tears slowing to a stop. The strength he drew from Hannibal was an honor to give. When he spoke, there were no tremors to weaken his voice. Only curiosity and relief that his charade was at an end.

“How long have you known?”

Hannibal considered that: the twisting, hazardous road that brought them to this moment. “That question has several answers.”

“Then give me all of them.”

Cheeky, demanding boy. At least that would never change. Hannibal smiled and settled his hands at Will's back. “I knew from the moment I saw you, that you couldn't possibly belong to Nigel. I knew when you woke up and immediately clung to Katinka, as if she were your path to atonement, that I was missing too many details to act on my suspicions. I knew, after having the privilege of your company for only a few days of complete coherency, there was so much more to you than the timid, harmless man you prefer the world to see. I have known, unequivocally, for almost four weeks now that you didn't kill my brother.”

“If I had?” A test. Just to hear what he would say to a question Will already knew the answer to.

“Then our relationship would have progressed differently.”

“Perhaps down that particular path in another universe.”

“Perhaps, but not to be in this life.”

Will's timid smile was such a sweet reminder of the memories they created over the short time they had together. He mulled his answers over and Hannibal was transfixed. Hannibal could see him working everything out. Every moment between them, every soft exchange. New meaning and motive behind the memories they shared. Clarity filled his eyes and Hannibal smiled as Will began to fill in the holes littering their timeline.

“You found out I didn't kill Nigel sometime right after your retirement party. That's why you were gone. Meeting a private detective or investigator.”

“Do you think I wouldn't look into your past?”

“Always so curious.”

“Insatiable, especially when it comes to you.” Hannibal tightened his hold on him, idly toying with the hem of Will's shirt. He decided to be kind and give Will a few pieces of the puzzle to work with, excited to see what Will would garner from them. “The people I paid outrageously well found me a number of interesting things. However, the most crucial leads

came by chance. One was a young man. He was understandably distraught, but such a thing does not excuse rudeness. He mistook me for Nigel, accused my family and I of doing something nefarious to Gabi, among other things."

"Charlie."

"He did not speak fondly of you."

"I'll bet." Will was annoyed on his behalf. He laid his head against his shoulder, his voice a pleasant rumble vibrating through the soft suede and into Hannibal. "I gave him a chance to not make any more trouble and he did the exact opposite. He could have put you in danger."

"I wouldn't expend further energy on him. He won't cause you, or anyone else, trouble again." Hannibal couldn't hide his amusement completely at the ridiculous notion of Charlie being anything other than an accidental threat to him, and when Will questioned him he only nuzzled his temple and teased the silky hair at Will's nape. "Unfortunately for him, Charlie chose not to take your warning to heart."

No tensing, no screaming, no running for the nearest police. Hannibal didn't honestly think that would be Will's reaction. Some horror at what Hannibal easily did, at what Will unknowingly participated in. Definitely some anger, Hannibal expected. But Will always surprised him. Will didn't speak for a long time. He slipped from Hannibal's hold, lost in thought. He turned his back to him as he went to the dingy window. Completely trusting that he could show Hannibal such vulnerability and come to no harm.

Will looked lost in the rain that poured down around them but Hannibal knew better. They had finally come to the point where they could not return. Both of them. No more hiding. No more secrets. Every part of Hannibal exposed. The most naked he had ever been before another person—and that person surviving the encounter. The first time Will revealed his true self to Hannibal. Completely and undiluted. Hannibal caught glimpses before, of course. Will's formidable mind. His understanding and sight.

And now it was all laid before him and Hannibal watched every moment, transfixed, as Will pieced together the unspoken and unspeakable.

"A tribute," Will whispered, tracing a drop of water down the glass with a fingertip.

"An offering." Hannibal could see Will's smile in the reflection of the window and his pulse quickened at the dreamy tone he next spoke with. As if reciting words he read off Hannibal's soul.

"Grief can transform us into the ugliest versions of ourselves. A heart is no good if it's broken beyond repair. What use had he of it now? Wasted and damaged. You repurposed his heart. Turned something ugly into beauty once more. A show of skill. And a promise. Your love is vicious, and stronger than the blubbering fool's you slaughtered. You would do anything for your intended." Will looked over his shoulder at him, eyes glittering in the flashes of lightning. "You haven't called me 'Gabriel' since that night."

“I couldn't bear to. You may have to pretend to the world, but you don't have to pretend with me.”

“And I never did, not where it counts. Not any of you.” Will returned to stand before him, curiosity getting the best of him. “What was your other promising lead?”

“Yet another perfect alignment of circumstances. You and Miss Lounds were so embroiled at the pier, neither of you noticed when I went to find you.”

“Eavesdropping? How inelegant,” Will teased.

“It's not the most uncouth thing I've ever done. I saw you talking intimately with a woman from the shop window. I couldn't let such an opportunity pass. It wasn't hard to find out more about Miss Lounds, keep an eye on her.”

“I'm sure she had some interesting things to tell you.”

“Half-truths and fabrications. Her value wasn't in the information she could give. It was more important that she remain in the dark about me.”

“Easier to hunt if everyone thinks you're a naïve, rich doctor.”

“Caught in the honey-trap of my brother's alluring widow.” Hannibal smiled at the annoyance that clouded Will's features at the insinuation.

“Oh, I'm sure she had plenty of those kinds of warnings.”

“A few. I only officially met her tonight. After I saw her with you at the symphony hall, I knew she most likely contacted you to finally issue her demands. One way or another, her reappearance would make you vanish and I couldn't let that happen. I apologize if I spoiled your plans, but you will no longer be meeting with Miss Lounds.”

For, perhaps, the first time in the evening, Will was frustrated and angry. With Hannibal. He groaned and ran a hand over his face and through his unruly curls. “I had it under control, Hannibal. Everything was close to being finished. This is exactly how I didn't want things to end.”

“I disagree. This was the only resolution there could be.”

“Whatever she told you, I wasn't going to pay her. Let alone with your family's money. This wasn't your problem to fix. I didn't want you to have to pay her off.”

Hannibal couldn't help chuckling at the idea. As clever and brilliant as he was, Will still didn't get it. “I didn't pay her off.”

“What did you do?”

“I simply took care of another pest. If you're worried about a trail left behind, there isn't one. As I told you before, I have perfected over the years all the ways to use every bit of the animals I slaughter.” Any lightness and humor he may have felt disappeared at the thought of

what Ms. Lounds had planned for him. For Will. He stepped closer, aching to touch Will once more but not daring to overstep if his lover was truly upset with him. With what Hannibal was willing to do to protect him. “Do you think I would let anyone threaten you? Take you away from Katinka? Separate you from me? Charlie and Miss Lounds, they do not begin to cover the lengths I would go to for you. I would reduce this world to rubble and lay the remains at your feet, if you asked it of me. I love you, Will.”

Will struck out with speed that Hannibal did not anticipate. His shocked gasp was swallowed in a ferocious kiss and Hannibal could do nothing but let Will take whatever he wanted. Even as sweet lips brushed his jaw and throat, there was a harshness to every touch. Greedy, starving touches. Hannibal could never allow Will to go without.

“Say it again,” Will whispered against his bleeding lips, tight grip on Hannibal's hair keeping him where he wanted. “Tell *me*.”

“I love you, Will. Always only you, Will. Always.”

Will shoved Hannibal's coat from his shoulders and pulled his sweater up and onto the floor. When adept hands fell to his belt, Hannibal's brain caught up with the rest of him. He cradled Will's jaw in his hands, taking control of the next kiss. Sex was not something he planned for this night. Too many variables had been left up to chance. The time frame too narrow for wasted seconds and careless mistakes. However, any intimacy with Will was never a waste nor a mistake.

Hannibal was in as much need as Will for comfort and assurance. That Will was safe and not gone from his life, in his arms where he belonged, was such an intoxicating thrill. He was powerless against Will's desire, fueling his own until he completely surrendered to it. They trampled their pile of clothes, stumbling over kicked off shoes and tangled limbs. The bed gave an ominous creak as Will dragged them down onto the hard mattress.

Neither man had it in them to be gentle. Not this time. Softness had no place in the animal frenzy they found themselves. The pleasure he always found in Will and his beautiful body transcended to something Hannibal had never experienced before. Will truly was divine. His love had thorns. His devotion came with teeth that tore and talons that rent to the bone. Hannibal's cries echoed through the atrocious motel room. A symphony of pain and wicked delight.

Hannibal watched as Will flickered in and out of the present, getting lost to whatever thoughts haunted him, even as he chased his completion. He nipped at Will's throat, tightening his hold on him enough to leave bruises. “Cruel, terrible boy. Stay with me, Will.”

“I'm here.”

“Are you?” Hannibal chased Will's wandering lips for a kiss and instead received a playful bite that broke tender skin. “Where do go, when you fade from me?”

“With you. Every version of yourself you've given to me. You're inside me. Every atom of me, I find you.”

Hannibal held him tighter, movements in sync with the harsh rhythm Will set. “You don't have to look far to find me. I'm here. I'll always be here. I have nowhere else to be, as long as you're with me. Don't leave me again, Will.”

“I wanted to protect you. I didn't want you to know. To see what I'm going to do. To see what I am.”

“I love what you are. I want to see. I want you to show me your beautiful design.”

“I will.” Will trailed his lips along Hannibal's throat. Soft caresses and kisses that were barely felt against the flushed skin. Loving and careful, even as his sharp nails drew blood down his back. “I'll show you everything. There's no going back. For me, but especially for you. You're my family, Hannibal. All I'll ever want. You and the baby. Our baby. Our family. The things I'll do to keep you...I'll never let you go now.”

Such vows pledged against his neck were almost Hannibal's undoing. He grabbed Will's hand, kissed his blood from Will's fingertips and couldn't resist sinking his teeth into his wrist. Not with enough force to break skin, just to feel Will shiver and fall a little further over the edge Hannibal eagerly brought him to. Suddenly, the urge to make Will completely his was too great to ignore. He had toyed with the idea before. A passing fantasy never dwelt on for too long for fear of robbing him of his sanity. But why should it remain a fantasy? Some impossible ideal kept from him? A happiness only achieved in another life? To let the opportunity pass him again was too terrible a thought.

“Whatever there is in you that Katinka hasn't claimed, is mine. You're mine. You belong to me. Marry me.” Finally speaking his wish aloud drove Hannibal into a possessive, insatiable haze. Having Will in every way possible—such perfect happiness shouldn't exist. But he wanted it. He wanted a family with Will and Katinka. He wanted to hunt with Will. Kill with Will. He wanted to watch Will spill blood and delight in the creation left behind. Everything Will teased and hinted at, Hannibal would have. Will's rapturous cries as Hannibal held him a bit too tight, moved within and around him a little too harsh, filtered through the lust overtaking him. In the throes of his climax, Will bit into the meat of his shoulder. Hannibal luxuriated in the feel of his teeth, in the blood painting his lover's mouth red. “Marry me, Will.”

Voice stolen, Will nodded his consent to Hannibal's demands. His head fell back and Hannibal watched as he became lost in sensation, in feelings he couldn't tell from his own or Hannibal's. He leaned to trail kisses along Will's throat, chasing after him as he slumped in a satiated heap on the bed. Hannibal fell over him, kissing the bloody smile teasing the corners of Will's swollen lips and the tears collecting on his lashes.

Hannibal's movements finally slowed, only falling still when they both were too sensitive to enjoy the over-stimulation. All the while he kissed Will and soothed his tears. “I'm here, beloved. I'm here with you. Never again will you be without. Never will you face your troubles alone. I promise, Will.”

Will pulled him closer, shivering as he used Hannibal to ground his chaotic emotions. He huddled beneath him to shield himself from the chill of the room and the coming barrage of pain and terror they still had to deal with. Hannibal wrapped his arms around his waist and

settled over him as a comforting weight. Will breathed a contented sigh as his grip tightened. Hannibal kissed the top of his head, the scar on his forehead and marveled at the man beneath him. How vulnerable he allowed himself to be in Hannibal's presence. A gift he would always treasure. Even now, after knowing Will for months, he could still make himself seem so small. Hannibal loved him beyond reason.

“Ask me anything and everything, Hannibal,” Will mumbled against his shoulder.

Hannibal ran his lips from scar to temple, tangling their legs together as he settled. Unlimited access to Will Graham. No more veils between them. Another tempting and wondrous gift. “Were you and Nigel lovers,” he found himself asking.

“No. Not ever.” Will shook his head as he traced random lines and shapes on Hannibal's back with gentle fingers. “We were newly-made acquaintances. He read me as fast as I read him. We became friends in the thirty-five hours that I was allowed to know him.”

A rush of epiphany through his veins and Hannibal chuckled. “You met on the train, didn't you?”

“Yes. He told me of Gabi's sudden desire to meet his family, alluding to the problems they were running from in hopes of saving their marriage.” Will ran his hand through Hannibal's hair and pressed their cheeks together. “I alluded to my own problems, and gave Nigel some advice.”

“Oh?” Hannibal leaned away to admire the smile curving Will's lovely mouth and run his hand through his messy curls. “What pearls of wisdom were you able to impart unto him?”

“I told him running from your problems only works for so long. You have to return to the root of them and chop them away, if you ever truly wish to be free of them. He understood me perfectly.”

Hannibal mirrored his smile and kissed him. “It seems Mr. Countryman was always fated to die.”

“A necessary death. It's fitting, somehow, that it was by your hand.” Will was quiet for a moment, considering the revelations of the night. “It's always been inside you. Your urges. Your *appetites*. The delight you take in killing.”

“Yes.”

Will's hand drifted up and down his side for a few swipes of languid touches before he gripped his shoulder and held him. “It's always been inside me, too.”

“I know. From the moment I saw you, I knew.”

“I didn't share the same appetite as you. However, Charlie was delicious.” He smiled as Hannibal kissed along his jaw. “The best meal I've ever had.”

“Made special, just for you. Only for you.”

Will kissed him before leaning away to look over him, commit him to his memory. “Nigel was the first person I told about Margot Verger, since the night I fled the states.”

A strange kind of liquid heat prickled along Hannibal's skin. “She's alive.”

“Yes. I'm sure Freddie Lounds told you the story she's been peddling, on Mason Verger's dime. I'm sure she told you I killed her.”

“Margot isn't hiding from you. She's hiding from her brother.” Hannibal cupped Will's cheek, mesmerized by the hungry way Will leaned into his touch.

“And she'll stay hidden, until it's safe for her to go home. Until I've killed Mason.” Will turned to kiss his palm. “Until our baby's born and safe from her awful family.”

Hannibal studied Will. Such secrets Hannibal did not expect. His reflexive reaction was anger. A vicious, terrible jealousy wanted to snag jagged hooks into his heart. He didn't know Margot and he suddenly wanted her dead. Envy, monstrous and worthy of the fatal sin. An emotion he didn't have a lot of experience with. How bizarre. But there was something in the way Will lay spread beneath him. Dark hair fanned across faded sheets. A blush remained on his cheeks from their previous tryst. Calm and lovely and completely Hannibal's. His serenity leeched the rage from him.

Hannibal leaned back to rest on his knees. “What game are you playing, beloved?”

“For once, I'm not.” Will sat up and pulled him close. “I wanted to tell you. I *need* you to know that it's not what it seems. Nothing is what it seems, right now. And I'll tell you everything, I swear. When I finish what I started with Mason, I'll tell you everything. But right now, it's safer if you don't know.”

Will trailed his lips across his shoulder and neck, along his jaw. Underhanded, but effective. Hannibal grabbed a handful of curls and pulled Will into a proper kiss. With just a few words and touches, Margot Verger and her awaited bundle of joy were forgotten. For the time being. “Very well. I trust you, Will. And I fully intend to collect on your promises.”

Hannibal indulged in a few more kisses before he forced himself to pull away. They dallied long enough. Will was perfectly content to watch him gather their clothes. A short inspection in the bathroom mirror revealed deep scratches along his back. Tender skin pulled with every movement and Hannibal admired his lover's brutality. He'd see to them later.

Trying not to preen too much under Will's gaze, he slipped back into his clothes. He returned to Will's side and couldn't help kissing him and running a hand along his chilled body. “We should start getting ready to leave, Will.”

Will stood with the offered pile of clothing. He wanted to say something, fighting with the decision of keeping his thoughts to himself. Whatever it was, Hannibal would wait. In time, Will usually gave in to the silence that built between them. Hannibal wasn't disappointed.

“I'm not going home with you. I can't. Pests taken care of or not, this isn't finished.”

“I know. We're not going home. I texted Mischa after I found your letter. I told her you had a family emergency and I was accompanying you on your way. We don't know how long we'll be. I told her at least two days. Just in case.” Hannibal watched Will in his periphery as he put on his shoes, noting his stilted movements and growing frown. He was angry with him. Or, more accurately, angry with his plans to join him.

“My view of you has slightly shifted in the last few hours, I'll admit, but I still didn't ever want this for you, Hannibal. I left because I was trying to *keep* you from unnecessary harm.”

Hannibal shook his head and smiled as he rescued his coat from its rumpled state on the floor. “There is no 'keeping from' when it comes to us. A part of you has always known I can handle all the secret things you try to hide. Just as I have come to understand that you will join me with what I do in the shadows.”

“Maybe it's not about you being able to 'handle' anything. Maybe I didn't want to risk your life. God knows I have enough Lecter blood on my hands.”

Hannibal put his coat on, tucking Will's scarf beneath, and started on his gloves. “And there you have it. My reason for not only coming to collect you, but my ultimate goal at this moment.” He pulled Will up after he finished taking his frustration out on his bootlaces, keeping him close. “Ms. Lounds was just a symptom. I have every intention of seeing the cause eradicated.”

Hannibal didn't have long to wait for Will to see the shape of his plans. “Freddie was working for Mason Verger, whom you found out about once you officially met her.”

“Mason Verger, in his efforts to obtain you, killed my brother.”

“He is now both of our problem.”

“Yes, and I am going directly to the source of it. Or, I should say, he will be coming directly to me.” Hannibal released his hold of Will to look out at the parking lot and highway beyond. It wouldn't be long now. “Ms. Lounds never intended on you eluding Mason. She was always going to give you to him.”

“I know.”

“To give herself a chance to escape, she had an alert set to send Mason your location once she was safely away. I didn't see the need to change her plan, as meeting Mason is my goal.” The glow of headlights grew brighter as two vehicles turned towards the motel.

Hannibal came to slip his arms around Will. He didn't have to say a word for Will to understand what was happening—what was about to happen. As Will always seemed to. They both had hunted alone their entire lives. And now they would hunt together. Finally, work as one. An irrepressible union.

Tires came to a splashing halt outside the motel room. Will ran gentle fingertips along Hannibal's jaw. The vehicles were close enough to hear their doors open and footsteps

approach. Their kiss conveyed everything Hannibal didn't say. All the cues Will effortlessly picked up on. Excitement building in the air around them, intense as the storm outside.

They would play before they made their kill.

Hannibal glimpsed the near-indiscernible smile teasing at the corner of Will's mouth before the door was kicked open. He turned as if protecting Will from the intruders. His questions and demands for them to leave were ignored. Will pressed his face against his back for a moment, muffling the small chuckle that escaped him as best he could. His delight was almost tangible.

One of the men came forward and gave them a cordial smile. “Good evening. Sorry to have startled you. I didn't know our friend here would be entertaining,” he apologized softly and gestured toward Will.

Hannibal noted his accent, Belfastian. He switched to English and blocked his view of Will. “You have the wrong room. We were just leaving.”

The man spared Hannibal a fleeting glance-over. His words were only for Will. “I've been sent on an annoyingly long chase for you, Will. Please don't make this any harder than it needs to be.”

“You not only have the wrong room, you have the wrong person. Please, be on your way and we'll do the same.” Hannibal took Will's hand and made to leave. In two steps, the cold barrel of a gun was pressed to his temple.

“We are on a tight schedule, Mr. Graham. The longer you play at this, the more my temper might get the best of me.”

Hannibal turned his face from the gun in feigned panic and distress. An interesting gamble, on their guest's part. The shot would be heard. They risked bringing witnesses about. A messy complication their employer most definitely did not want. Not after the last humiliating failure. It could only be deduced that they were bluffing. Because of the text he sent, Mason would want Hannibal brought along. This was nothing but a display of sadistic curiosity. Just to see how Will would react. His beloved didn't disappoint.

“All right!” Will abandoned the safety Hannibal provided and came slowly to the bounty hunter with hands raised in the air. “You have me. I'll come with you. Just—”

It wasn't agreed on beforehand. Hannibal knew from personal experience Will's skills as an actor. In turn, Will was only beginning to understand the level of thespian Hannibal was. They hadn't discussed how the next few hours would play out. But then, they didn't have to. Their game was something so few knew of. Definitely not something comprehensible to the likes of these worker bees, or the pig who sought them. In the dark they would remain. Until the time Hannibal and Will tired of deception. What fun could be had in the meantime? Hannibal decided to experiment.

“Gabriel?” Hannibal let hurt and confusion bleed into every syllable of the horrid name. It was an unwelcome moniker that he hadn't missed. By the look on Will's face at hearing it, the

feeling was mutual. “What is he talking about?” A beat or two before he processed what the bounty hunter was hinting at. It was easy to manifest the expected shock and sorrow at learning the terrible truth. His voice held the slightest tremor when he asked, “I was right, wasn't I?”

“No.”

“From the very beginning. You lied. About everything.”

Tears gathered along his lashes and he had to look away from the flagrant desire in Will's rapt gaze. If Will wasn't careful, Hannibal would have to kill these interlopers and their plans would be delayed. He smiled, a twitch of movement which Will was the only one who caught and interpreted. *Soon.*

Will shook his head and came to him. He seemed so distraught. Heartbroken that Hannibal learned his secret in such a cruel way. When Hannibal didn't respond, remained frozen even as he took hold of his lapels, Will's tears slipped free to collect on lips he had tasted only moments before. “Not everything. Please, I—” Will was pulled from him, wrists tied behind him with biting plastic. Then, they came for him and Will only struggled enough to be convincing. “He has nothing to do with this! Just take me! Mason only wants me!”

The man in charge of the hunting party stood before Will as he oversaw their handling. “Normally, I would agree. I don't care who you pretend to be *every fucking time you run*. I don't care who you fuck in the meantime, for that matter. I'm not paid to care. However, Mr. Verger became aware of the good doctor you've been playing house with and paid extra for his delivery. So.” He shrugged and signaled his men to escort them out.

It was almost exactly as Hannibal imagined. Their vehicles were of a better quality than he expected and he admired the black Mazda SUV they were pushed into. So much could be gleaned from cars and gadgetry. Professional, high rates for their services and worth the money spent. Unlike the fools who botched apprehending Will in Romania so spectacularly, this group knew the advantages of subtlety.

Aside from their bindings, Hannibal and Will weren't touched by their abductors. It didn't matter what they saw or if they were conscious for the trip. Mason wanted them unspoiled for whatever horrors he had planned. The scant moments they had alone in the back of one of the vehicles was precious and savored. They huddled close, not speaking but taking comfort all the same. Hannibal gave no reassurances, made no promises. Will gave no honeyed words of false security.

No matter what happened, by the end of it all, someone would be dead. And whoever it was, Hannibal intended to eat them.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if you're aware of this, but there's extra dialogue in certain places that's not in Mr. Lecter. One of the reasons is that Will is sometimes an unreliable narrator. He becomes overwhelmed and fades out from whatever he's doing. I thought it'd be cool to add some "missing" dialogue between him and Hannibal to show what all was happening from Hannibal's POV, and it's just something like a treat for those of you who returned to basically reread the story. :D There's also an extra scene that goes more into what Will and Hannibal were doing in between the proposal and when the bounty hunters arrived. I hope you all liked what I did.

I hope anyone reading enjoyed this chapter. See you next update! Please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

P.S. If you're interested, feel free to visit me on tumblr!

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! I am so happy that everyone who commented enjoyed the last chapter. :D I had a lot of fun with it, and this next chapter was pretty delightful, as well. I think you'll like what I've done. I feel like writing a story with Hannibal Lecter is a blanket warning on its own, but I'll go ahead and warn before you start: things get a bit graphic here. Not the worst I've done, but I don't know everyone's personal limits and just wanted to give a heads up. Hannibal does the thing he does so well here. ;) Also, before I let you get to the good stuff, I want to thank Welcome2the_Goondocks, EmilyElm, Stralovat and Imanerdandliketoread for taking the time to let me know you're out there enjoying the story. You all always leave the kindest, most thoughtful comments and I can't really put to words how much I love reading them, or how much it means to me that you enjoy my writing enough to comment. Thank you! :D <3

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen

Hannibal listened to their abductors' conversations as the lonely predawn miles rushed by. As scant and infrequent as they were. There was nothing in their tedious exchanges that hinted at what was to come. However, the way they grew tense the closer their destination arrived, and the clipped way the leader referred to their employer, told Hannibal more than enough. It wasn't fear he felt for Mr. Verger but dislike. He would take Mason's money, do the job to his professional standards, but he could just as easily kill the American than work for him.

It wasn't clear when the contract ended. Were their skills needed once he and Will were delivered, or would they disappear once paid? Hannibal considered the addition of their force and what would need to happen to disarm them. He doubted their participation, if it came to that. When they heard the screams, their defense depended entirely on whether or not they already had cash in hand.

His planning came to a pause as they left the highway for empty country roads. Another half-hour of navigating forgotten dirt roads and overgrown trails brought them to farmland that hadn't seen bountiful crops or thriving livestock in more than one generation. Paths had been cleared that led to a dilapidated farmhouse and a barn across a field from it. The rest of the land was covered in several feet of ice and snow. On all sides they were surrounded by forest. Isolated. Guarded by what Hannibal already counted as fifteen hired muscle, with the likelihood of another handful of men as yet unseen.

There was a line of vehicles in front of the house. Their abductors parked behind them before getting out. Blissfully alone for only moments, Hannibal turned to Will and kissed the shell of his ear. “We're in Latvia.”

Will nodded as he kept his eyes trained on the leader of the bounty hunters and a man who came out of the house to greet them. They seemed to be having a conversation that quickly grew heated. The bounty hunter turned back to the SUV, agitation and frustration in every line of his body as he returned. He pulled open the back passenger door and hauled Will from his seat. It wasn't an act when Hannibal turned to lunge after them, only remembering himself at the last second. This was supposed to happen. He reminded himself as he watched Will get dragged through the snow and shoved between the two men as they argued.

This had to happen. To free themselves, Hannibal had to allow this all to unfold.

A twinge of amusement fluttered through him. Even without the aid of hearing them, it was clear they were having a bit of a monetary dispute. Someone wasn't fond of paying for services rendered. How terribly low-rent. When it all seemed to be taken care of, Hannibal was escorted out of the car. He was close enough to hear the leader's last words to Will.

“Goodbye, Mr. Graham. It was a fucking nightmare tracking you down.”

He watched as Will and Hannibal came to their future torturers, willingly and without fight. Amused understanding filled his eyes and he nodded to Will as he and his men started to leave, now that their business was concluded. As he passed, Hannibal couldn't resist and winked. Not a sound to tip anyone off, nor a warning to his former employers. No love lost between him and Mr. Verger, then.

They were brought up the decaying steps of the sagging porch and into the house. The interior was warm. Cozy and gaudy in décor. Expensive furnishings and gilded ornaments placed about the rotting house in an almost haphazard design. Unsettling to every one of Hannibal's senses. Hired thugs surrounded them in the entryway. Jeering and simple creatures. Paid to be violent. Nothing but useless meat for he and Will to practice on. It was the man who intercepted them that interested Hannibal. He had been courteous and pleasant, containing the madness that lurked behind his friendly smile. Only when Will tried to come to Hannibal's side did he step between them.

“Mason wishes for the two of you to be prepared for the evening,” he explained as Will and Hannibal were grabbed. “Something a little more formal for dinner.”

Hannibal didn't have a chance to see where Will was taken as he was pushed up the stairs to a second-floor bedroom. His captors wanted to be violent. He could tell by the way they cut his bindings and pushed him toward the suit that hung on the door. They didn't notice his smile as he stripped and reached for the clothes, too busy looking anywhere but him. So, it was ordinary bigotry that fueled their desire for his blood. How mind-numbingly boring. No harm would come to him, Mr. Verger's money saw to his and Will's perfect condition. Still, he could feel their malice like a hot breath against his neck. Perhaps, he would tear the lungs from their chests while they still begged for their worthless lives when the time came.

Used to multiple layers, it didn't take long to slip on the suit. Dark brown with a faint gold pinstripe. White shirt. Cream silk tie. It wasn't fitted how he preferred and drab by his standards, but he always appreciated effort. And for a reason he had yet to decipher, Mr. Verger was attempting to make an effort on his account. What Hannibal knew of him, it wouldn't be anything pleasant.

When he finished, he was escorted back downstairs. His guards took him through a few darkened rooms until they reached the dining room. A blazing fire crackled away in the hearth. Candles flickered along the length of the ten-person dining table. Three places were set. Hannibal was escorted to the solid oak dining chair at the opposite end from the other place settings and didn't resist when he was restrained against it with a strap across his ribs.

Hannibal was only able to study his surroundings a few moments more before Will joined him. He couldn't help smiling at the disgruntled picture his lover made. Shoved into an ill-fitted suit. The colors complimented him. A navy blue with dark red accents. Complete with matching pocket square and tie. He looked like a boy forced to go to church. With an attitude to match, as he all but rolled his eyes and stomped over to the chair his guards waited to tie him into.

They were supposed to pretend to be scared. Will seemed to have all but forgotten the ruse in his annoyance and hatred for superficial showmanship. As the guards moved to stand off to the side and out of the way, their eyes met across the centerpiece of white roses with sprigs of white Veronica throughout, and they shared a smile. There was a charge between them that no one else seemed to noticed. To Hannibal, it was a dark, electrifying feeling. Anticipation of the act had never been such a heady experience until now. Movement in the shadows beyond Will caught his attention and Hannibal finally came face to mangled face with Mason Verger.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I hope you weren't waiting too long.” Mason set his hand on Will's shoulder in a mockery of warmth and welcome before taking his seat at the head of the table. He looked Will over with amusement, the only one in on his joke. “You look rather dashing, for a man who was supposed to have died.”

“And you sound surprisingly articulate, for a man who has no face.”

The man from earlier appeared with three plates balanced on his arms. Their host was served first. Hannibal felt it could be forgiven, considering the circumstances, that he didn't thank him when a plate of white and gold-trimmed china was placed before him. He spared the oysters in half shells a glance before returning his gaze to Will and Mason.

The last to be served was Will, and if the man could have thrown the plate in his lap he would have. He was insulted on Mason's behalf. “Yes, he is. And he will only recover further with more grafts and transplants.”

Mason gestured to their makeshift attendant, “This is Cordell, Will. Brilliant doctor. He's done some miraculous things over the past few months. With my funding, and his ability to not let little things like ethics and laws stand in his way, he has turned the mess you made into a work of art.”

Cordell smiled at Mason and gave a self-conscious bow, a pleased flush to his round cheeks. “That's kind of you to say, Mason. It's been a pleasure working with you.” He stepped away to putter about at a serving cart set off to the side. Noticing he had yet to touch his meal, Cordell came to Hannibal's side. “*Oysters Verger*,” he indicated the plate in front of him. “My own twist on the American dish: Oysters Rockefeller. You're not allergic to shellfish, are you?”

Hannibal flinched away, as far as the straps around him allowed, and gave a jerking shake of his head. “No, I'm not.”

Cordell ignored how unsettled he was, smile growing wider as his pale eyes looked over Hannibal's face. “Very good. I would hate to have to contend with a surprise outbreak of hives or swelling.”

Hannibal didn't know what to make of that. All of his theories didn't bode well for himself. Cordell's concern was an extension of Mason's, and would remain only for the duration of his employer's attempt at hospitality. He was saved from any further small talk, and Cordell's invasive staring, by Will's untold reserves of cheek.

“You must be so proud that you could pull all of this off.”

Mason enjoyed his wine, an oyster and another, before he responded, “Very. After that botched attempt to nab you in Romania, I knew you might be somewhere still around this part of the old world. I would have rather shipped you up to the farm, Will, but this one is doing rather nicely for what I have in mind.”

“You bought and furnished an old farmhouse on the chance I *might* still be in the country.”

“A bit like playing a global version of 'Pin the Tail on the Donkey,' but I was rather close in my guess. If Lounds had been better at her job, I would have known exactly. Still, she came through in the end. Finally filled me in on all the juicy tidbits of what you've been up to.” Mason finally looked to Hannibal; a strange, almost salacious, gleam to his manic eyes as they swept over him. “So nice to meet you, Dr. Lecter. Mason Verger, of Verger Meat Packing and Processing—and now specialty breeders.”

Mason was just as Hannibal imagined. A simple monster, with simple urges. The product of having every advantage in life, doting parents and no one to question or challenge him. It all couldn't be complete without the mask of righteousness to hide his depravity behind. Hannibal didn't need a doctorate to know what made Mason Verger tick. Nothing substantial made up this construct of pampered flesh and bones. Weak. Ignorant. So incredibly blind.

How was Hannibal supposed to resist toying with such simple prey?

“Romania?” His voice shook and he took a breath to calm down. Mason grew more excited as he fed on the fear Hannibal exuded, as he knew he would. Sadists were nothing if not terribly predictable. “You had something to do with the crash.”

“I do apologize for any inconvenience that caused you. Can't get quality help hardly at all, these days! But if you're looking for someone to blame, look no further than your little bed-

warmer here."

"Gabriel—Will—wouldn't do something like that."

At Hannibal's dolorous assertion, a certain kind of delight brightened Mason's wild eyes. The giddy anticipation of causing pain. He dabbed delicately at the corner of his disfigured mouth with a canary yellow napkin. "Are you sure? Up until a few hours ago, you thought he was someone else. You have no idea who he really is. A deranged psychopath. Cold-blooded." He motioned toward his face with a manicured hand. "Your darling's handiwork. Left me to die, in my family's own pig pens, after he killed eleven people. Who knows what sick and twisted things he did to my twin sister, Margot. God rest her poor, heathen soul. They haven't found her body yet."

Hannibal spared a glance at Mason's face. It truly was a work of art. Far better in the flesh than a meager picture. Perhaps, when there was time, he would admire it for longer and up close. Maybe he would take it with him. At the moment, he could barely tear his gaze from Will. So different from any other time Hannibal had been with him. While Hannibal allowed his emotions to get the best of him, give their audience what they expected from a heartbroken fool; Will was his opposite. Cold. Harsh. Playful and dangerous and completely unconcerned for anyone but himself. A new version of Will Graham Hannibal had not had the pleasure of watching. Until now.

Will smirked as Mason spouted on with his self-victimization. The tension faded from him and he relaxed back into his chair. Unashamed and breathtaking as he admired the ruination he facilitated. "You shouldn't have sent your men after me. I noticed you have a new pet following your every command." He glanced to Cordell with a smile teasing his lips. "I take it Matteo didn't make it."

"No, he didn't. Nor did Carlo. But you already know that. There was barely anything left. His last act of loyalty to me was letting the pigs get their fill of him first, before they started on me."

"When you train your pigs to eat human flesh, you can't be surprised that they'll go for your throat just as quickly as everyone else, Mason. Well, face, I should say." Will straightened, meeting Mason's gaze. "And the others? They forfeited their lives the second they took your money. The moment they touched Margot."

"Those nurses and doctors were just doing their job, Will."

"Yes, just a routine, forced, hysterectomy on an abducted woman." Will scoffed. "They had what was coming to them."

"Apparently, I should have acted sooner. It wasn't bad enough that Margot upset Papa with her insistence for shopping at the market across town, but then she changed her mind and picked *you* for her stud horse." Mason pointed his fork at Hannibal. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, doctor, but Will here is gay for the pay. You should check to make sure he didn't clean you out while he was hiding in your house. Lord knows he cozied up to Margot hoping for a chance to get part of the Verger fortune."

Such simple motives. Did everyone honestly believe Will so pedestrian? Surely, a pig of such corruption as Mason understood deeper desires than money. Even a little bit. How disappointing he truly was. Hannibal said nothing, did nothing, to further entertain their host. He was quickly growing tired of this game. Will finally looked to him and the rest of the room faded away. His words were only for Hannibal.

“Margot never had a moment's peace with her brother in charge of their family business. When her parents were alive, and then with Mason, they tormented her constantly for not being a good, Christian daughter. 'Not the marrying type.'” Will smiled, a boyish and charming little thing. “She wanted a baby. I helped her. And if I could help her get away from her brother's control too, all the better.”

“That was never for you to decide.” Mason's grating voice broke through the moment of reprieve between them. The only consolation was the annoyance in his tone. “Because of your interference, you set back all of my plans I had for dear Margot. And our baby. A *real* Verger baby. I can't allow any heir of ours to come from such poor seed. Though, I'm sure I can find some use for your bundle of joy.”

Will focused back on Mason and smiled, slow and wicked. “You don't even know where her body is, remember? And you'll never know. You'll never get near her baby.”

“Never say 'never,' Will. I think you'll be changing your tune very soon. I can't wait for you to see what all I have planned for you.” Mason shared a laugh with Cordell. “And if not you, maybe when I spend some time on your friend here you'll grow more talkative.”

Hannibal let the fear at such a threat wash over him. He looked to Will and his betrayal over the past few hours grew to an overwhelming ache. There was nothing in those eyes he recognized. Distant. Detached. Unforgiving. Livid—a word that could mean wrathful or blue-gray. The perfect description of his wolf's eyes. Hannibal turned from his burning stare, fearing that their audience would see the intensity of his devotion if he didn't.

A sob broke free from him when he heard Will sigh and say, “It's a shame, he was the perfect cover. Technically, Mason, I'm probably more considered 'gay for the stay.'” What a cruel, magnificent boy.

“Unfortunately, your stay has been cut short. Too bad for Dr. Lecter, to end everything knowing it was all just an act. However, what can you expect when you partake in such an impure union? The Devil is always looking to deceive.” Mason laughed and stood from the table, making a sweeping gesture with his hand. “And since it looks like I'm the only one who's appreciating the feast Cordell slaved over, let's move on to the main event. Cordell, if you would.”

Cordell came to him to loosen his restraints. “If you would follow me, please, Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal stood, moving slow and submissively at his captor's command. A glance back over his shoulder showed him Will being escorted from the entire house. He had every faith in his lover that he would survive whatever dramatic torture Mason had in mind for him. It wouldn't do either of them any good if he let fear or concern overwhelm him. He locked everything he

felt for Will away to focus on what he needed to do. Seeing to Will and his needs would have to be held off for now. They both had a while longer yet.

Cordell led him deeper into the house and down a narrow staircase to the basement. Hannibal looked around the room, impressed with the renovations. Most likely from Cordell's advice. Mason must have begun work as soon as they moved to the old house. Instead of a dank and filthy root cellar, they entered a small operating room. Not too different from Hannibal's own basements.

Soundproof. Pristine. Medical equipment new and mostly unused. Hannibal couldn't help his curiosity from blossoming at the sight. He still couldn't guess their plans and it made him impatient. As much as he wanted to kill everyone wandering this miserable property, he wanted to know *why* more. Why all of this? Hannibal took in the shining tools ready for use, as bleach tickled his nose and blood they missed while cleaning caught his eye. This all felt like a deviation to the plan. An evolution of Mason's desires.

It was no longer about finding Margot and punishing Will. Mason never cared about damage control or covering his tracks. For now, Hannibal tamped down his questions and theorizing. This was the moment he could not afford any mistakes. Then again, when it came to hunting, he never made mistakes.

“Sit here, please.” Cordell motioned toward the hard surface of an operating table. Hannibal hesitated for only a moment before complying, earning a plastic smile from him. He started slipping on hospital scrubs and readying his work station. “I didn't know Will. I only found out about him after Mason's attack and began working for him.”

“You have a deep loyalty to Mason.”

“Our tastes somewhat align. Mason has no problem with the ethical question of live subjects. He can have as many graft procedures as he wants, and I can experiment in peace.” He trailed his fingers along a row of scalpels before selecting one and putting it on the station. “A terrible thing, what Will did, but it was a fortunate twist of fate that brought Mason and I together. Much like how Will's actions brought *you* into Mason's life.” His ever-present smile had a cruel sharpness to it.

They all were so confident. Condescending. They thought he was an imbecile. Some simpleton led around by his passions. Charmed by a pretty face and an eager body to spill inside. They underestimated him. They underestimated Will. For a brief moment, he contemplated pleading for mercy. Bargaining his release. Just to see how far Cordell would go for Mason. In the end, he decided against it. As fun as it was to play at being scared, there would be no point other than entertaining himself.

Hannibal was in the middle of a den of sadists. There would be no mercy for him. That was good, because he had none for them.

Cordell turned and approached him with a filled syringe. “It's time to prepare you for your first transplant, Dr. Lecter. Or donation, really.”

Hannibal almost laughed, the aborted sound mistaken for a terrified gasp. Everything fell into place and Cordell didn't notice the flicker of a smile that twitched at the corner of his mouth. “Mason plans to take my face for his own.”

“Not just yet. I'm going to start with the skin from your legs and arms. If Mason doesn't reject your tissue, we can harvest skin from other places to test, and so on until I feel confident we can progress to the complete facial graft. I hope it all works out, this time. Mason is quite taken with your face.”

“People often are.”

Hannibal could have incapacitated Cordell by snapping his neck. Make it a clean death. Painless. Efficient in the unknown window of time he had. But where was the fun in that?

Since this whole nonsensical farce began, a low-simmering rage grew inside him. Every time he thought of Nigel's mutilated corpse. All of their conversations they now had from the confines of his memory palace, because Hannibal would never get to speak to his twin ever again. Taken from him. Ripped from his family. Far from Hannibal, who had been powerless to save him. Whenever he laid eyes on Will. His haunted lover. Sick with guilt. Terrorized by these animals. Thoughts of Will taken away as well, it was more unbearable than any threats to his own safety.

It made Hannibal want to cause as much pain and fear as possible.

These pigs dared to threaten him? Did they think they were anywhere near his level? They were not his betters. They were not his peers. Just another pack of mad dogs, too used to biting whatever hand they wished.

Hannibal waited only for Cordell to get as close as necessary before striking. Cordell was a large man. Tall and in shape enough to bring bodies to his operating table, willing or otherwise. However, he did not possess the same kind of training or the experience of sparring as Hannibal. Hannibal's movements were too fast for the doctor. Strong and precise, the jab to Cordell's throat crushed his larynx and destroyed the slim chance he had at anyone hearing his screams.

As Cordell gasped for rattled breaths, Hannibal hauled him close to sink his teeth into the thick meat of his cheek. He tore the flesh free and swallowed it as blood dripped from his chin to run in warm rivulets down his suit. Instead of savoring the sweet, rich taste, reveling in the horror that filled Cordell's eyes, Hannibal grabbed a scalpel and cut to the bone across his neck.

Hannibal stepped over Cordell's twitching body as he took stock of the room. No other way in aside from the stairs. At least six other men in the house. Mason and Cordell didn't seem the type to want hired grunts in the operating room while they worked. No one would come this way. He would have to go to them, hunt them one by one. On his way back upstairs, he took up the bone mallet he spied earlier.

There wasn't time to linger, draw out the pleasure of the hunt. That was not to say Hannibal wasn't thoroughly enjoying himself. A kind of catharsis could be found in a bloodbath. To let

it consume him, after keeping such a tight leash on himself for months. A pleasure all its own —the act of letting oneself be taken over by the most base instincts and urges. By the time he cleared the house of guards, bodies stacked discreetly out of the way, Hannibal was soaked in blood and flecked with chips of bone.

Back in the basement, mallet set aside for the time being, he waited out of sight by the stairs. Mason wouldn't kill Will just yet. He wanted Will to suffer. Torture most likely the extent of his tedious plans. In the hopes of extracting the whereabouts of Margot Verger from him. Also, to simply prolong his enjoyment of hurting Will.

In between visiting Will, Mason would want to check in with Cordell as often as possible. He would want to watch the skinning process. Observing without getting dirty. How many unlucky souls lost themselves piece by piece under Mason's fascinated stare? And now a prized specimen was held in his basement, awaiting the blade. No, Mason wouldn't linger with Will.

From the first time he set foot in the basement to returning from his sweep of the house, twenty minutes had ticked by. It shouldn't be long now. He smiled as there came a stirring in the quiet above. A door opened and shut. The careless gait of an arrogant buffoon echoed across the creaking floorboards. The door at the top of the stairs opened.

“Cordell, what do you know of stud farming? I imagine human insemination must be the same as any other breeding process. Will is a poor strain, but he'll do for what I have in mi —”

Mason's rambling came to a choked halt as he flounced into the room. He was having difficulty processing what he was seeing. It wasn't the large pool of blood beneath the body. The mutilation of the face and neck wasn't unsettling to him. Frozen fear in dead eyes didn't ever send him into a panic. Mason was no stranger to depravity. Cordell dead was more an unforeseen hitch than anything else.

“Not used to having your plans ruined, are you?”

Hannibal fell upon Mason before he could turn toward the sound of his voice. He wrapped his arm around him, pinning Mason's flailing limbs down, and tightened his free hand around his throat. Mason struggled but wasn't anywhere near strong enough to fight Hannibal off. He was used to prey much weaker than him. His legs kicked feebly and then gave out completely as his oxygen was cut off. Hannibal shuddered, pleasure rippling through him, when he caught the scent of Mason's fear. He dragged Mason further into the room, toward an operating table waiting behind a curtain.

“You are lucky, Mason. Your life is not mine alone to claim.” Hannibal lifted his limp body onto the table and admired the sight he made. Mason was semi-conscious, groaning and attempting words that his lolling tongue could not form. “There are no restraints to keep you from wandering off. I doubt my beloved will mind if I take some precautions, do you?”

Mason managed a strangled yelp before Hannibal lunged forward to grip his jaw and wrench his head until bones and tendons snapped.

“There.” Hannibal smiled as fear flooded the paralyzed man's eyes and patted his chest. “We'll be right with you.”

Hannibal grabbed a coat off the rack by the front door. Bone mallet once more in-hand, he went in search of Will. There were only a few areas in this terrible place Will could be. He noticed a well house and a barn when they arrived. Knowing what he did of Mason, it wasn't difficult to surmise which he would find Will inside. It was important to Mason for Will to experience the full treatment of a pig in the Vergers' care.

The morning sun had yet to penetrate the twilight. There was nothing to light the way to the barn. Hannibal preferred the cover of darkness. He stalked through the snow, encountering no one. Half-way to the old barn he could hear screams coming from within. What awaited him upon entering nearly brought him to his knees. Not in anguish, but awe.

The smell of death was cloying. Out of so many bodies in the barn, only one was alive. Will stood with his back to him. He looked over his shoulder and brandished an ax at the sound of someone trespassing into his domain. Naked and shivering and covered in the blood of his kills. He was terrifying and beautiful and Hannibal wanted to worship at his bloody feet.

His god of death. His messenger of vengeance. Retribution in the guise of a mortal man.

Hannibal dropped his mallet and came to him. Will met him halfway, ax falling from red hands. His lover feared for him. Hannibal saw it in his eyes as they looked over every inch they could, noting every drop of blood that marred his skin and clothes. He felt it in the frantic touches that fluttered over his face and hands. Hannibal studied Will in turn.

Something was wrong. Beneath the smells of clotting blood, cooling meat and spilled and spoiled innards, there was the unmistakable scent of caramelized flesh and singed hair. The feverish sweetness of pain and blistering. There was a tightness to Will's features that spoke of contained discomfort. Adrenaline would mask the worst of it for only so long. When Hannibal circled around Will to inspect further, he found the source of the scent; the cause of Will's pain.

From behind, Will was barely spattered with the blood of his foes. It made finding evidence of Will's own wounds easier. Angry and red. Swelling and irritation made the image hard to decipher, but it looked to be a brand. The squealing of pigs echoed through Hannibal's head as he studied the Verger crest in the middle of Will's beautiful back, between his shoulders. Marked. Scarred. But never owned. Never possessed. *Never.*

Hannibal took his coat off to slip over Will, helping him put his arms through the sleeves. The fabric caught on tender flesh and forced a hissed whimper from Will. Hannibal leaned in to press fervent kisses to Will's temple but did not come close enough to brush against his back. “Forgive me. Please bear this for a little while longer and then I promise I will take you far from here, see to your burns.”

Will didn't verbally respond, nodding only once as his body began to shake. He turned and pressed cold lips to Hannibal's cheek for a brief moment of comfort and then took a step toward the door. They were not done. Will knew that. The sky was just beginning to brighten

and there was still so much to do. Hannibal would keep an eye on him, make sure he didn't fall too far into shock.

He took up Will's bloody hand and led him back to the house. Silence all around them. A light snow started to fall. Everything had a muffled, dreamlike quality as Hannibal watched Will step delicately through the red-tinged drifts on bare feet. It felt as if they were the only people left in the world.

As they walked through the house, he watched Will. Still the silence remained around them. No breathing. No footsteps. No quiet conversations coming from the rooms above or the secret places below. But Will could hear something. The air was painted with screams long faded. With his free hand he reached out to glide his fingers along a splash of blood seeped into the tattered wallpaper. His fingertips found a fresh dent in the wall from a head slammed against it. All that was missing was the body.

They walked further down a dark corridor and Will pushed open a random door. Not so random. It was to the room Hannibal chose to toss the bodies of Mason's unfortunate guards. Hannibal came to him as he looked over all the faces frozen in surprise and terror. He rested his chin on Will's shoulder, looking where Will did, trying to imagine it all through Will's eyes.

“Can you see it, Will?” Hannibal pushed a stiff lock of hair behind his ear and kissed his lobe. “Can you see what I did? How quickly I worked? How they all died in one or two blows?” He ran his hand down Will's arm until he reached his hand, tangling their fingers together. “Can you feel the urgency I felt as I destroyed everything that kept you from me?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal smiled at the sleepy cadence of Will's voice. “Come.” He led Will down to the basement.

When Will cleared the stairs, he took in the brightly lit room. Props placed all around them on a sinister stage. Hints to a story that would never be told. IV stands at the ready. Tools and equipment to not only torture, but to keep alive for a long time. Will studied everything, from the glinting scalpels to the stocked cabinets, with growing rage.

A satisfied smile flickered along his pale lips when he looked over Cordell's body. Face-down in a congealed pool of his own blood. The unmistakable bite mark exposed to Will's curious gaze. Hannibal watched him and knew Will was reliving Hannibal's attack as if he had been there. As if he himself were the one to wield the blade and tear through flesh with his own sharp teeth.

Hannibal took Will's arm and guided him further into the room when he looked his fill. “I have something for you.”

They came to the curtained-off area and a kind of giddiness rippled through Hannibal. He swept the flimsy plastic aside to present his gift to Will. It was a pleasant surprise to find Mason was still alive. He hadn't succumbed to his injury, choking as he fought to breathe.

Mason tried to speak, but only clicks and wheezes escaped his damaged throat. His eyes found Will's and his lover gasped, stepping up to his jumbled form.

“You didn't kill him.”

Hannibal watched Will as he studied Mason. “He was your quarry before he was mine. I wish to share in your kill, if you will permit me.”

Will turned to lean against Hannibal. A tremor wracked his form, but it wasn't from the cold or the pain he felt. He hid a smile against Hannibal's shoulder. “Yes.”

Relief warmed him to his very soul. He kissed the scar on Will's forehead and took comfort in his scent. Rich with blood but familiar and precious. “What do you see when you look at him, Will?”

Will glanced back at Mason before turning into the warmth of Hannibal's chest. “He's a *pig*. Less than even the animals he ruthlessly slaughters. A disgusting beast, ruled by revolting urges, who's not even fit to eat. He's hurt so many innocent people. Destroyed so many lives.”

Hannibal tilted his face up to look into serene blue eyes. “What's to be done about that?”

“*Show* me what you see when you look at him, Hannibal. For Nigel.”

What an astounding boy Will was. To give him Mason. For his treasured lover to help him realize his evolving vision—Hannibal would never be able to convey what such a generous boon meant to him. Even if he were to live for a thousand years at Will's side. Hannibal kissed him. Iron and salt. Almost too perfect to be real. “I never thought I could love someone as I do you, Will.” Will's shy, blood-speckled smile was too tempting to not kiss once more before he came to Mason's bedside. “Forgive me for leaving you so long unattended, Mr. Verger. Now, let us see what we have to work with, hmm?”

Chapter End Notes

One of the reasons I didn't post last week was that this chapter has *a lot* going on. In fact, I ended up splitting it all up into two chapters because this would have been twenty pages. There will be one more chapter at Mason's farm, so you'll have that to look forward to next week. :) Speaking of, I've been looking at my notes and I think this story will have three, maybe four chapters left. Maybe. We'll see. Hannibal is a lot more detailed than Will, he might not let us escape without a few extra chapters thrown in. :D

I hope this wasn't too repetitious for you all. A lot of the dialogue had to stay the same when Hannibal was in the same room with Will. I hope the new scenes with Hannibal on his own made up for it. I really enjoyed getting to explore these parts of he and Will. I can't wait to show you all what happens next. I think you'll like it.

Until Thursday! Please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! For those of you who let me know you liked the last chapter, I think you'll enjoy what I did here. :D Warnings from last chapter are the same as here. It's a little graphic. Not the worst I've ever written, but it's definitely not sugar-coated or glazed over for part of it. I meant to say last chapter, if anyone feels this is no longer M and should be E, let me know. I don't think it is, but I'm open to hearing feedback. Before I end things here, I wanted to thank Ruthless330, Stralovat and EmilyElm for taking the time to leave me such wonderful comments. I really appreciate hearing what you think and you're always so thoughtful. :D
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen

Before any of their plans could be implemented, Hannibal had to retrieve his coat from the room he changed clothing in. Sewn into the lining of the pocket were a few poppers. Hannibal always liked to keep a few on his persons whenever he went hunting. One never knew what any given situation might call for. He thought up the idea decades ago, during his youthful years of club-hopping. Nights full of the kind of merriment only sex, drugs and pulsing music could generate. Will watched as he broke one of the capsules above Mason's face.

Hannibal smiled as Will studied him, Mason's reaction as he couldn't help but breathe it in. “A concoction of my own invention: a blend of hallucinogens and other compounds that Mason will find incredibly euphoric. This blend also has the benefit of making him compliant.”

“Loosen his tongue,” Will added, as he watched the drug work instantly.

Mason Verger felt nothing but ecstasy. Even when Hannibal straightened him on the bed, moving his head into an angle that wasn't so awkward. His breathing evened out and the rattled wheezing turned into wet, coughing laughter. Hannibal felt along his neck, pleased to find that while the bones were broken, his speech wasn't affected. Or his propensity for being long-winded.

“What did you give me?” Mason's giggles were high-pitched and hysterical. His pupils were blown as he tracked Hannibal's movements.

“Just a little something to help you relax, Mason. Patients with severe injuries such as yours, who have used similar drugs, have reported feeling painless and an exhilaration akin to sky-

diving.” Hannibal sat on a stool beside Mason with his phone in hand, ready to type what Mason divulged. “Now, as much as I would love to get started on butchering, there are a few problems I need your help with.”

“While you have me alive?” The jagged hole where Mason once had lips veered into a crooked smile. Bleached white teeth glimmered in the fluorescent lights hanging above. Hannibal wanted to pull them out of his faceless skull one by one with his bare hands.

“That's right,” he returned his smile as Mason sighed and giggled to himself. “I imagine you did all your business, while so far from the comforts of your family farm, via phone or laptop.”

“Both,” Mason blurted before dissolving into laughter. The look in his watering eyes, buried beneath layers of drugged elation, was that of a man who was not in control of his actions.

“Wonderful. Where can I find them?”

“My room, of course. All the way at the end of the hall. Upstairs.” One bright teal eye winked at him. “Would you like a tour?”

“Thank you, Mason, but I can manage on my own. What are the passwords for each?” Mason spouted off a series of letters, numbers and symbols. At least he was smart enough not to choose a word tied to anything personal. Then again, Mason didn't strike him as the sentimental type—and with too many secrets to hide behind something guarded by the name of his favorite childhood pet. Hannibal waited for a spell of choking laughter to subside before continuing. “The website you use for keeping track of the bounty you have on our dear Will, I imagine you own the servers and domain.”

“Oh, you're very good at this, Dr. Lecter.” Mason laughed until he choked on his coughs, blood welling at the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you.” Hannibal smiled and watched as Mason giggled through another spasm or two, unable to concentrate on the pain with the drugs constantly battering his pleasure receptors.

“You want those codes, too.” Mason licked his lips and his smile was stained red. “I wouldn't mind parting with them, dottorino, if you give me another hit of the good stuff.”

“Of course.” Hannibal held up another popper in his line of sight. “I will give you as much as your heart can handle. More.”

Desperate hunger brightened his eyes and Mason told him what he needed to know. In exchange, Hannibal supplied him what he wanted. It would be interesting to watch just how much of the drug Mason could take before he blew a hole in his heart. An experiment for another time and a different specimen. Hannibal already had plans for Mason's body that too much of the hallucinogenic would ruin.

“Now, Mason, I want to know about the people you sent to Romania.”

Mason rolled his eyes. “Ugh! What about them?”

“You don't seem the type to pay your grunt workers, especially if they fail so spectacularly like they did in their attempt at securing Will for you. Did you kill them? Or are they out there somewhere, scrambling to fix their blunder?”

“I wish I had killed them! You know, those idiots almost cost me everything! They went and spooked Margot. She took off before they could nab her. And then went and killed forty-some odd people in their panic to at least have *something* to show for their incompetence. Absolutely ridiculous! Talk about PR I don't need! It took me *ages* to spin things back home to keep the nosy press away from my business and then—”

“Mason,” Hannibal cut off his ranting with a firm tone and a gentle hand on his chin, bringing Mason's attention back to him. “Forgive my bluntness, but I don't care. I want to know if they're alive and, if so, where is there contact information?”

“Oh,” Mason made a crooning sort of noise and sighed. His pupils dilated further as he stared at Hannibal. Forgetting, once more, what they were talking about. “You have a *really* nice face. It's a shame I didn't get to play with you. You're older than what I usually prefer, but I can see why Will was so eager to commit such sins.”

Will was not so gentle.

Mason came to a stuttering stop, confused as to why his lyrical waxing of Hannibal's attributes ended. Will gave his cheek another stinging slap. Nothing that would exacerbate Mason's neck injury. Just enough to shock him back into coherency.

“Focus.” Will's tone was even sharper than what he would use on Mira. He wouldn't be cruel to a dog. “Who was it that sabotaged the train?”

“An Italian group. There contact information is all on file.” Mason dissolved into another fit of laughter, telling Will names and cities in between.

Hannibal watched Will take over questioning, pleased with his lover's initiative. Often Hannibal thought of those directly responsible for his brother's death. He imagined what he would do if ever given the chance of meeting face to face. Did Will imagine it, too? The hunt they could share, long after the pig before them was a rotten husk of sagging skin and brittle bones?

Will turned to him. “I think we have all we need.”

“Has Mason fulfilled his purpose?”

“Alive, anyway.”

“Excellent.” Hannibal stood and started to roll up his sleeves as he went to the sink. He washed the lingering blood from his hands, preparing for any and all procedures that might occur in the coming hours. “Will you be observing or participating?”

“Observing *is* participating.”

Hannibal dried his hands and picked up a pair of gloves. He couldn't help smiling as he looked over Will's form. Still too pale for his liking, but he was showing promising signs. “If you're alert enough to be cheeky, I don't think we have to fear you going into shock.”

They returned to Mason's side. He hadn't noticed their absence. As he giggled at whatever his disturbed mind conjured for him, Hannibal noticed something troubling when Will came to his side. Hannibal carefully took up Will's hand and then the other, studying them with growing anger. The marks around his wrists suggested handcuffs, or something similar. The tell-tale swelling around his thumbs cemented his suspicions. Will hurt himself in order to free himself.

“It's nothing,” Will attempted to assuage his vexation.

“Move your wrists and fingers as much as you can for me.” His mobility was not where Hannibal would prefer, but his injuries were mild enough to not be too concerning. Hannibal brought Will's hands close to kiss. “Let me know if the pain becomes too much.”

“Of course, doctor.” Will's sweet smile disappeared as he looked over Mason's waiting form.

“I want his presumptuous hands.” Hannibal browsed the spread on his station and picked up a gleaming Charriere bone saw. “I'd like to take them while he's still awake.”

Will put his hand over Hannibal's. “May I?”

Hannibal kissed his forehead and passed him the saw. “Of course.” He turned away to find something to hold Mason's arms in place.

Will needed no direction, no extra words of encouragement. He simply took hold of Mason's hand and begun. The saw was placed two inches above the wrist, leaving room for error though there wasn't any. Hannibal wanted to ask if Will had done such a thing before. His movements were skilled. A little clunky from his injuries, but the cut was developing cleanly.

Through it all Mason laughed. He grew especially hysterical, tears streaming down his ruined face, when Will separated his left hand completely from his body, letting the appendage fall to the floor like trash.

As Will walked to the other side of the operating table, Mason chuckled. “I don't know why you're bothering. Joke's on you! I can't feel anything from my neck down.”

“I don't need you to feel this, Mason.” Will smiled as he looked him in the eye, noting how pale Mason had grown. “This isn't actually about you. Not anymore.”

A moment of surprising shrewdness came over Mason and he sneered. “Good old-fashioned revenge, is it? Don't pretend that you're upset about Dr. Lecter's carbon copy. You should be thanking me, Will. You made out like a bandit, with him and his missus out of the way.”

Will smiled as he straightened Mason's right hand. “Nigel saved my life. I'll never be able to repay that debt. Not in full. However, I think this is a good starting place.”

Mason's heart was pumping overtime with the drugs in his system. He would bleed to death soon. Hannibal enjoyed watching Will take what he wanted as much as he enjoyed the sight of Mason Verger fading before his eyes. His remaining hand fell to the floor with a wet thud just as Will returned to Hannibal's side. He took the saw, and the kiss, with a pleased smile.

“Have you ever castrated anyone,” Will asked him.

His pleasure knew no bounds and Hannibal couldn't control the grin on his face. He must have looked like a lovesick fool. Will didn't seem to mind. “No, but the procedure should be simple enough. Is that what you want next?”

“Only if it doesn't interfere with your overall design of him.”

“Not at all. In fact, I almost want to accuse you of reading my mind.”

“I wish I could have gotten my hands on your twin, Dr. Lecter,” Mason interrupted them. “Put him in a cage, next to Will's. Lower them both into my special pig pen at home, when the time came. At the same time. Make you choose. I wonder what could've happened.” He giggled, even as the bleeding from his wounds continued at a gallop to spill onto the floor.

“It's never good for one's psyche to dwell on all of life's 'could haves,' Mason. I forgot I wanted to take your tongue the moment I heard your exacerbating voice. Your interrupting us reminded me.” Hannibal turned to Will. “What shall I take first, testicles or tongue?”

“Tough call. He'll be dead before we finish both. On the one hand, taking his 'manhood' while he watches would be the most satisfying thing I can think of. On the other, he can feel from the neck up.” Will sighed and put his hands inside his borrowed coat pockets. Shocked pleasure brightened his tired features as he pulled out a 2 lati coin. “What do you say? Flip to decide?”

“Let Fate make our choice? Absolutely.”

“Heads for head, Tails for tail.”

Hannibal took the coin and tossed it into the air. The flash of gold and silver mesmerizing. He caught it and opened his palm. They both looked at the gleaming coin, smiles growing as they turned to Mason. Tongue first, then.

* * * * *

The tragedy that befell Mason took no time at all to finish. With Hannibal's expertise, there was barely a mess to clean up after. He took what they decided and a few extra cuts. They would keep in the house's freezer until a time Hannibal could return to collect them. For now, he would just have to trust that the seclusion of the old farm would keep their secrets. It was, after all, why Mason chose it.

Hannibal was eager to take Will home.

It was a fortunate thing that Mason's men didn't work quickly to destroy the evidence of their presence. Their clothes were in the rooms they had left them in. Hannibal gathered their

belongings and changed out of his bloodstained suit. Will assisted him in nothing but the dark overcoat. More an overseer after his hands started bothering him, but Hannibal didn't mind. It was enough that Will was actively participating, sharing in his vision and inspiring him. It was a gift Hannibal honestly thought he would never experience.

He helped Will clean up as best he could and dress. Reminiscent of when they first met. The idea must have occurred to Will as well; for there was a smile teasing his lips even as moving must have hurt and he rewarded Hannibal a sweet little peck on the cheek in thanks for his assistance.

Hannibal didn't bother with the rest of the bodies. Perhaps he would return another time. The cold would keep them for at least another day or two.

Cordell had been very thorough with the supplies needed for such an ambitious endeavor as a continuous organ transplant facility. Everything they needed to clean any trace that they were there away was already kept in the many stocked cabinets. It took no time at all to sanitize the basement. All they needed to retrieve after that were the electronics scattered about with the bodies, the valuable laptop and phones belonging to Mason and Cordell and the clothes they wore.

It was as if they had never been there.

The same care was given to Will's motel room, later that day when they returned for Hannibal's car. Other than Will's one bag, he didn't leave anything to be traced back to him and paid for his room in cash. If anyone thought to look into either locations, they'd only find random thugs, unlucky tourists and ghosts. No one would find Mason Verger, stumbled upon or not, until Hannibal and Will were ready for him to be found.

The first of Hannibal's evolved splendors. He couldn't wait for the world to see what he and Will created.

It was with that satisfaction settling deep in Hannibal's bones that they arrived back at their home. Late afternoon bleeding into evening. He finally let some of the fatigue he had kept at bay trickle through his body. Only a night and part of a day, but it felt longer. And there was still a bit more to do before they could finally rest.

Will had yet to notice where they were, or even that the car had stopped. It took a few calls of his name to bring him back from wherever he wandered. His wounds were getting the best of him again. The trauma and relief of the past few hours drained whatever coherency Will had left.

“Bell?”

Hannibal smiled at the priorities Will's mind always seemed to focus on. “Mischa went out for the day, taking Katinka with her. They should be gone for a few more hours yet.”

He helped Will from the car, careful not to jar his back or hands. As Will limped his way into the house and up the stairs, Hannibal tended to Mira. Mischa must have checked on her before going on her outing, for there were no accidents awaiting him to clean up. Even so, the

pup happily scampered to the backyard when he called to her. As he watched her play, and bark at suspicious leaves, Hannibal called Mischa.

“Is everything all right?”

Hannibal smiled when she answered after one ring, concerned questioning in place of a greeting. “Hello, my dear. Yes. Everything is fine.”

A sigh of relief crackled over the connection. “Good. That's good. You sound exhausted. How is Will? Is he okay?”

“We're fine, darling. Just as I promised. Though, we are very tired.”

“How was he?”

She meant Will's skills as a hunter. Paired with Hannibal's. How they were together. He chuckled, unable and unwilling to smother his smile. “Will was extraordinary.” It was all he could say. For the first time in his life, he found himself lost for words. “He was...”

“Indescribable?” He could hear her smile in the tease of her words. “I am so happy you both are home, Hannibal. I'll keep Katinka until you call to say you're ready for us to come over.”

“We only need a brief respite. I expect we'll be ready by brunch tomorrow.”

“Good, because I've been absolutely beside myself not having my brother and your lovely Will in my sight.”

“Then we better not deny you longer than necessary.”

They hung up after their loving farewells and Hannibal settled Mira for the night. As he climbed the stairs in search of Will, Hannibal scanned the floors, banisters and doorknobs for any trace evidence Will might have left. He was pleased to find nothing obvious, though it wouldn't hurt to clean in the coming days. The sound of the shower running tipped him off to where Will was.

A hot shower was a marvelous idea.

Hannibal kept his clothes in a contained pile and smiled when he found Will did the same to his. It would all have to burn. Hannibal would buy Will whatever he wanted in replacement. Thoughts of shopping trips, clearing out the furnace at one of his properties to make room for a new load of kindling and a myriad other things on his growing to-do list evaporated when he walked into the steam of the shower.

Will barely acknowledged his presence as he stood beneath the gentle mist. Hannibal didn't waste time on himself, quickly washing and rinsing the remainders of their trip to a lonely, Latvian farm away. There wasn't much on him. Most of the blood had been on his borrowed clothes and he wore scrubs and gloves when he worked on Mason.

The same couldn't be said for Will. What had yet to flake off, dried sticky and stubborn across the expanse of Will's pale body. Some of the blood dripped away to swirl around in

puddles at his feet. The rest of it would take more effort to remove than Will had the energy for. With gentle touches, Hannibal pulled Will from the tiled wall he leaned on and turned him to better see.

He took up Will's hands to check the damage. Just a little more swelling than before and the bruises had darkened over the last few hours. “I don't think there are any tears or fractures, but I recommend x-rays. Just to be safe.”

Hannibal turned Will's head up with gentle fingers to his chin. One of the only places not marred by gore. The hot water softened the stiff and tangled strands of his hair. Blood ran down Will's face and neck and Hannibal was bewitched by the sight. Had he ever seen a finer, more powerful image, than Will drenched in the blood of his kills? He couldn't recall and he didn't care to. Such a fierce creature he was. And he let Hannibal near enough to see all the parts that made him what he was. Savage and passionate. Primal and brilliant.

With careful touches he wiped the bloody streams from Will's cheeks and kissed his forehead. “Imaginative lone wolf,” he praised.

He took his time cleaning Will. His hair needed a few handfuls of shampoo before the water ran clear. Pink foam dripped down Will's form until nothing was left behind but slick skin. Too pale even for Will's usual fair coloring. It was as if Hannibal worked to bring life and breath to blue-veined marble. Only after they had been under the shower's spray for almost thirty minutes did the honey-gold undertones return to Will's skin, the flush Hannibal came to expect and adore following soon after.

While he had Will warm and docile, still between being alert and that dreamlike fugue state he wandered into, Hannibal turned him once again. “This is going to hurt, Will, but I'd rather do it now instead of waiting and possibly have you develop an infection.”

Will awoke completely at the feeling of even the softest of washcloths against his burns. He didn't fight, didn't jerk away from Hannibal's touch. However, Will's verbal outbursts let Hannibal know exactly what Will thought of him. He couldn't help smiling as he worked the blood and dirt free from the grooves and crevices of the brand. Will's vulgarity was preferable over the frozen silence from earlier.

They toweled off and dressed in the loose pajama pants Hannibal set out. With supplies waiting in their bedroom, Hannibal brought Will to sit on the bed as he wrapped his hands. Will was going back inside himself. Hannibal allowed it. They had been through so much, Will receiving most of the trauma. Physical as well as emotional. As much as Hannibal loved to push him, he understood that even Will had limits. He comforted himself by having Will as close as possible. With just the slightest maneuvering, Will spread himself across his lap. As Hannibal applied a layer of ointment to Will's back, Will began to speak. Halting and soft. Secrets confessed against Hannibal's thigh as arms wrapped tight around his waist.

“I met Margot Verger a little over a year ago. Back when I worked for the FBI. The only reason the Vergers and I ever crossed paths was because the branch of the bureau I worked for suspected Mason of white-collar crimes—tax evasion, fraud, money laundering and possibly trafficking. It didn't take a genius to see Mason was capable of so much more. I kept my thoughts to myself, did my job, helped build a case against him. During that time, I

befriended his sister. She's his complete opposite. She came to me with her fears. And her desires. If she could have a baby, an heir to her family's fortune and legacy, she could escape Mason. So, I helped her. I've never really thought about my sexuality. I rarely connect with people, so any time I do have sex—it doesn't matter their gender. But Margot's not like that. She has her preferences, and I don't fit them. I hope one day she can find a woman who loves her, start a family with her. That's all she ever wanted: to raise a baby far from Mason's influence.

“But I knew a baby wouldn't end things. I *knew* Mason wouldn't be able to let her go, not leave her baby untouched. He was controlling and sadistic. That, combined with his ridiculous conservative and religious upbringing, made him one of the worst kinds of monsters. It was almost a compulsion, his need to dominate and hurt Margot. I kept an eye on them. And, finally, I got her to make plans to leave. It was set up like witness protection. We both would part ways, go somewhere neither of us knew about and stay in sporadic contact. Until she was ready to have the baby. Then we would meet back up and settle things with Mason.

“The night we were to leave to our separate locations, Mason sent some of his men after me. After I dealt with them, I tried to get a hold of Margot. If he finally made a move against me, there was no telling what he did to her. I was on the phone with her when Mason's enforcer attacked her—ran her off the road on her way to meet me. Mason got away with so many terrible things because he committed his crimes at his family's mansion. I knew this wouldn't be any different, so I went there.

“When I found Margot, she was unconscious on an operating table. A doctor and nurses all around her. Mason was gonna take her uterus. Make sure she had no one left but him. I killed them all. They didn't deserve any kind of mercy, and if I left it to the authorities, they would have walked free after a slap on the wrist. Before I took Margot away, I paid Mason a visit. I couldn't kill him. Their father's will would have left Margot destitute if Mason died without there being a future heir. So, I punished him. In a way that befitted a man as disgusting as he is. And then we ran. Until Margot and the baby were safe. Until I could deal with Mason for good.”

Will released him and sat up to straddle his legs. He fidgeted as he waited for Hannibal to say something. Hannibal took him by the hips to settle him. The touch helped to ground him, order his thoughts. Just when he felt he knew Will, could predict some of his actions, he would surprise him once more. Will was right. Nothing was what it seemed. Such a hopeless situation he fled from. Margot, as well. Will didn't need to say it, but Hannibal had a good idea of what Mason did to her over the years. What he had planned to do still. How could he blame her, punish her, for seeing salvation in Will? He simply couldn't.

“Margot sounds very brave.”

“She is. And strong.”

“She would have to be, living in a house full of sadists. I am glad you were able to be a friend to her.”

It was the truth. Thinking of her now, the child she risked her life and body for, only filled Hannibal with a strange kind of sadness. He wouldn't have to call on Margot Verger. A spring lamb was not a threat to someone like him. This conclusion brought with it a kind of relief that left him exhilarated. To know he wouldn't be forced to do something that would upset Will left him feeling shaken. He ran his hand along Will's side. Just to feel him. Will pressed into his hold but winced, hissing as he disturbed the burn on his back.

He pulled Will until he lay once more across his lap so he could press around the burn. Now that the swelling had gone down, he could see it was not a severe wound. Ridding Will of it should be fairly simple. “I can alter this, if you wish. I could make it illegible, so the name can't be seen. Or I could remove it entirely.”

Will groaned and sat up, shaking off his probing fingers. “No more procedures. Give me a week or two, at least.”

“Very well.”

Will smiled and leaned against him, running his fingertips along the hem of Hannibal's pants. “It's all over. No more running. No more hiding.” He chuckled, incredulous and happy, and rested his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder. “I hardly know what to do with myself.”

Hannibal ran a hand through his damp hair. “Whatever you choose, I hope you include us in your plans.”

“Well, we are engaged.” Will's smile widened even further as he remembered Hannibal's rushed proposal. Demand, really. He cupped Hannibal's jaw to turn him toward him. “I do love you, Hannibal. I don't think I ever got to say it out loud.”

“But you showed me. With your body and deeds. With blood and your brilliance. With the hunt you shared with me.” Hannibal knew, but to *hear* Will say it caused a painful kind of rapture inside him.

“No one else but you. You're the only one I've ever wanted to reveal that part of myself to.”

“And I cherish it. I'll nurture it and help it flourish. As you have, and will, help me strive to be my best. I promise.”

Hannibal kissed Will and moved them around until they lay flat amongst the pillows. He took care to not cover Will's back with the blankets. Will sprawled half on the mattress while the rest of him used Hannibal as a body pillow, legs tangling with his and head resting comfortably on his chest. Hannibal stared into the gathering darkness, playing with the curls Will had yet to trim. He found Will's hand in the shadows and kissed the gauze wrapped around his palm.

“I didn't have the chance to compliment you on what you managed to do in the barn, or for your contribution to Mason.”

Will chuckled, a tired sigh of breath against Hannibal's sternum. “Oh? Fan of improvisation skills borne from terror and panic?”

“It's so much more than that. Don't be modest on my account. The bloodlust you give yourself over to, it's inspiring. Your uncanny ability in pulling your victim's true self to the surface to be judged and displayed—I admire all of your methods enormously.” Hannibal kissed his temple, his ear, before whispering, “I love your work.”

Will shuddered and pressed closer, half asleep when he said, “Pick the time, the medium, and I'll show you more.”

Chapter End Notes

Part of the reason that this reads so differently from Mr. Lecter is that I constantly stayed within the perimeters of the story not only being a Hannibal AU, but also an AU of Mrs. Winterbourne. That's probably the biggest reason, honestly. I took a few liberties, but I stayed as close as I possibly could to the bones of Mrs. Winterbourne. Here, I didn't really have to do that. Hannibal's version of events, while staying within Will's story, is a vastly different experience. Still romantic, still a dark comedy. But I get to show you all things Will couldn't. It was a lot of fun to explore and I'm just really jazzed that people were interested in this AU, so I could play around with it. :D

Again, if this is now wandering into E territory let me know. Hannibal on a murder date might be pushing the M line. :D I really hope everyone who stopped by for this chapter enjoyed what all I came up with. It was a blast getting to show what he and Will got up to. I think you'll like what comes next. See you Thursday! In the meantime, please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! The last few chapters were a trip, eh? :D They had really great responses and I'm glad you all liked a more in-depth look into what happened to Mason, etc. ;) After the excitement and mayhem of the last few chapters, this is a bit of a wind-down. Sort of. I don't think these two characters can ever be completely chill. If I was pressed to summarize, I'd simply say, "Pre-Murder Husband Shenanigans." This also marks the beginning of Part Four. Before I end this note, I just want to thank Stralovat, Ruthless330, ropaola and AhumokIo for taking the time to leave such wonderful, thoughtful comments. It makes me so happy, every time I see you've left me something and I love hearing what you all think.

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Act Four:

The Wolf's Mate

Chapter Eighteen

“This is lovely, Hannibal.” Mischa took another sip of the wine she praised, after admiring its dark color and bouquet.

Hannibal smiled as he poured a glass for himself before joining her at the dining table. Black and purple candles were lit, casting shadows amongst pomegranates, pearlescent abalone shells and dark pieces of driftwood Will found on one of their walks along the river not far from their home. The natural baubles surrounded an arrangement of asters, chrysanthemums and carthemus flowers. The entire display joint effort that Hannibal admired throughout the afternoon as dinner was prepared.

He held his glass close to take in the scent of the red wine. Cloves gave it a warm undercurrent, to him. Though, what flooded his senses most was the teasing, decadent aroma of cherries and roses. “Soldera Sangiovese,” he supplied for Mischa's curiosity.

“It tastes like Christmas. While sitting around eating fruit and cheese and letting bottled Christmas Past go to my head with my brother *is* one of my favorite things, I have to say I am shocked that you're not commandeering the kitchen.”

Hannibal waved his hand, still holding the liberal serving of wine, at the spread. Figs, guavas and apples—charred and buttered, paired with blue cheese, Camembert and cheddar. “You

are currently feasting on the extent of my participation in this evening's meal. Well," that wasn't entirely true. "I was allowed full control of the ratatouille."

"A surprise for us both, then." Mischa laughed at the expression he couldn't quite mask. "Whatever it is, it smells delicious."

That it did. Something rich and dark. With enough heat to tickle the back of the throat. Hannibal had an idea of what the main course would feature and his mouth watered. Anticipation made a hunger awaken within him that no amount of nibbles would ever satiate.

"He has been rather sneaky about it all, preparing it since last night." Just as Hannibal mentioned him, the man appeared through the door of their formal dining room.

Will served Mischa and Hannibal first before joining them at the table. Keeping Hannibal's jewel-bright ratatouille company was a generous portion of roasted Brussels sprouts. Leaves crisp on the outside, tender on the inside. A bit of that heat Hannibal came to expect and crave whenever Will insisted on taking charge of the kitchen. Acidic balsamic vinegar, smooth honey and stone ground mustard. An interesting combination that made Hannibal long for warmer climates and sun-bronzed skin.

However, it was the main dish that stole his breath and threatened to rob him of every ounce of decorum he had. Baby sister present at his table or not. Nestled atop a mound of buttery mashed potatoes were delicate strips of meat. Drizzled with mushroom gravy. They looked like they would fall apart at the slightest touch of a fork tine. Cooked to perfection.

"What did you decide to feed us, Gabriel," Mischa asked as she picked up her knife and fork.

Will sipped his wine. A pleased smile teased at claret-stained lips. "Beef tongue. It's a recipe I picked up back in Louisiana. Nothing fancy. I hope you like it."

How could they not? Time and effort went into such a dish. A cut of lean meat often thrown out. Too much work, and most people were squeamish when it came to this part of the animal. It took time. First, it needed to be boiled for hours. Preferably overnight. Then, it had to be skinned and cleaned. After that, the chef was free to make whatever they wished from their labor of love. Mischa was treated to actual beef.

Will served Hannibal Mason Verger's tongue.

And a delicious cut he made. Will treated him to the same process as any old bull put to pasture. Boiled. Cleaned of any undesirable veins and fatty tissue. All of the tough skin was removed to leave only tender meat behind. Seasoned and browned before left to simmer with gravy made from drippings and fresh mushrooms. It fell apart with barely a press of the knife and melted in the mouth.

Hannibal stole continuous glances at Will throughout dinner. Flushed from the heat of the kitchen, his cheeks held a rosy glow. Dinner was not a formal affair, so Will came to the table in one of his pairs of snug jeans and a sweater. Light blue wool. It brought out the shifting kaleidoscope of colors in his eyes and clung to his athletic frame. A feast for Hannibal's every sense. Just as fulfilling as the bounty Will provided. He couldn't look away for long.

“You would normally think such staring was rude.”

Hannibal's attention snapped to Mischa. He ignored her teasing, and her soft laughter, to focus once more on his plate. “Is it rude when one is captivated? That would be like chastising me for admiring *La Primavera*.”

Will shook his head, not taken in by his silver tongue, and gave all of his attention to the Brussels sprouts. “More like *Irises in Monet's Garden*.”

“Oh?” Mischa abandoned her meal to delight in Will's surliness. “Because you are a burst of color and light, amongst the passing shadows?”

“You're as bad as your brother.” But there was a smile tugging at the corner of Will's mouth. “No. Because from far away, it all seems put together in a picture that makes sense. When you get close, you quickly begin see what a big mess it actually is.”

Mischa hummed in agreement, sipping her wine as she looked over them both. “Hannibal has always loved the messy things in life.”

“He's a sucker for the broken,” Will teased.

Hannibal caught Will's hand to hold in his lap as he continued to eat. “I love beautiful things. I'm a 'sucker' for the avant-garde.”

Mischa laughed and picked up her utensils once more. “How you both carry on—and you're not even married yet.” Her smile dimmed for just a moment. “It's a shame Robertus and Murasaki aren't here to join us.”

Will smiled, meat poised at the end of his fork. “There will be other dinners.”

“Of course, there will be. It's just: this is the first meal we've shared after your news of engagement.” Mischa's smile grew until there was no hint of her previous sadness. “Which reminds me, we need to start on all the details of your engagement party.”

Will winced, groaning as he swallowed his bite of tongue. “I thought I only had to worry about the actual wedding and reception.”

“Nonsense. You must have a party long before the wedding, to announce your plans.”

“A pre-wedding party. For the wedding party. This conversation is giving me indigestion.”

“Do you not want to get married,” Mischa teased.

With all the honesty the question didn't deserve, Will answered as he cut into another delicious morsel of Mason Verger. “I want nothing more than to stake a public claim on Hannibal. It's just that crowds always get to me.”

“Quite the conundrum you've found yourself in,” Hannibal said. “Perhaps a compromise? We could have a masquerade. Surrounded by a throng of people, but no one would know you were among them.”

“Oh! A theme!” Mischa practically vibrated out of her chair with excitement. “One such as that takes care of everything else—dress code, place, time.”

“Why can't it just be us?” Will's grip tightened around his hand for just a moment before he relaxed, thumb tracing over Hannibal's knuckles. “Just us. Our family. No party. No menu. No bells and whistles. All the rest really doesn't matter to me.”

Hannibal knew Will was mainly protesting just to tease Mischa. It worked. She was appalled and scandalized and Hannibal hid his amusement behind his napkin.

“Darling, you don't understand,” Mischa implored. “This is another chance—the first—to brag over Hannibal's find. All of Hannibal's admirers and annoying wannabe suitors will absolutely have fits when they learn that he is finally, *completely*, taken. And when they see the beautiful boy who stole his heart? I can't wait to watch it all unfold.”

A pleasant flush spread from Will's forehead to neck. He pulled his hand free to settle over Hannibal's thigh, giving him a comforting squeeze before standing. “All right. Gloat all you want, Mischa.” Will started gathering their plates to make room for dessert. He leveled a firm glare at Mischa, tone the same as when he attempted, and failed, at sounding stern for Katinka. “No masks, though. I mean it.”

Later that evening, Hannibal found Will on their balcony, looking out over the backyard and into the dark treeline beyond. Hannibal brought with him two glasses of Armagnac. They drank in silence as a late autumn drizzle fell around them, splashing against the balustrade and trickling off the eaves. Hannibal lingered close by until he was draped along Will's back, arms around his waist in a loose hold. Along with the brandy that graced his palate, Will's taste heightened his senses. He kissed along his neck and marveled at the complexity of him. A flavor beyond comparison.

“Will it cause trouble for you, for your family, if you're engaged to your former brother-in-law?”

“I'm not marrying my brother-in-law. I'm not marrying Gabriel Lecter.” Hannibal smiled when Will leaned into him as he trailed his lips along his pulse. “The man I made a place for in my world has always been Will Graham.”

Will pressed closer, shivering as Hannibal's light touches ran along his back. The raised scarring of his brand tangible through warm wool. Completely healed in the few weeks since they walked away from an abandoned farm, and all the secrets held within. He turned to Hannibal, settling his hands at his waist. “Can you give me more time, Hannibal, before I become 'Will' for good?”

Hannibal considered the question, surprised by the request “Tell me what you fear will happen, if you shed the guise of 'Gabriel.'”

“I'm not afraid.” Will shook his head before resting his temple against Hannibal's shoulder. “My hand was forced with Lounds and Mason. I just want everything to go to plan, this time. I want to tell your family the truth. Before a party. Before Nigel comes home, with Gabi. But

it looks like that will have to wait, until after I go to Margot and wait for the baby's birth. Can you wait that long for me?”

Hannibal smiled and kissed the top of his head, wrapping his arms around him tighter as the wind picked up. “I will wait however long you need me to. I promise.”

* * * * *

Hannibal was slowly dragged from the depths of a sound sleep by kisses. Along his chest. Across his stomach. Down his hip. When familiar lips tickled along the inside of his thigh, he struck. Will came easily and eagerly into his hold, smiling as Hannibal devoured his mouth. This was a new phenomenon: an amorous Will. His lover had once been so anxious and thorny. So afraid he was too much trouble. Terrified to let himself have what he wanted, dreading the moment it would all be taken from him.

Freeing himself from his past, sharing in the intimacy of killing with Hannibal, opened a door inside him that allowed Will to finally embrace what he was. Delight in the things he had been afraid to enjoy. To not hesitate to take what he wanted. It was beautiful to witness and Hannibal's duty to encourage. However, Hannibal still glared at the windows when he noticed how dark the sky was. It was before even when he got up.

“It is very early, Will.” His voice was a rasping growl that made Will laugh when he mumbled the obvious against his throat. Hannibal didn't let him reply, kissing him every time he opened his dangerous mouth.

Even so, the hour turned out to not be a factor in Hannibal's response to Will. Half-asleep or otherwise, there was a beautiful man in his bed. Tempting and fervent and ravenous. Someone saintlier than Hannibal could perhaps resist such an offering. He had no desire to do anything of the sort. He took a few minutes to reacquaint himself with everything that made up the perfect form of his lover.

Skin made soft and pliant from untroubled rest, warmed by the press of bodies and silk bedding. Strength and power in the definition gained from the need to always keep active, expel the nervous energy that would build up if too long idle. And all over, covered in scars of battles won. His fierce Will. Hannibal adored every inch of him.

Just as Hannibal finally decided on what to do with him, Will escaped his hold to once more slip beneath the down-filled comforter. His earlier exploration resumed and Hannibal could do nothing but slump back against the pillows and let Will do whatever he wanted. Hannibal's voice rang out into the silent morning, loud to his ears but he couldn't bring himself to suppress every sound of shock and delight Will drew from him. It was a fortunate thing, he supposed, that Katinka's room was down the hall and their home had very good insulation. If he woke Katinka, Will would go to her—trained as he was now to rush to her cries. Hannibal was the same. However, he might kill Will if the man dared stop.

He only grew louder as his pleasure mounted. His skin felt on fire, every nerve ablaze. Had he the energy or brainpower, he would have laughed at how quickly he was reduced to such a shivering mess. And yet, it all became even worse when suddenly every wondrous sensation

came to a halt. The noise he made would have embarrassed him if he wasn't so affronted by Will's audacity to not finish what he started.

Hannibal lay panting in a tangle of silk and limbs, barely hearing the voice over the rush of blood in his ears. Will. Deep and rich, the timbre of his words a torturous vibration against his hip.

“Even though my dad moved us around constantly, following the tides and the jobs, I was born in Louisiana.”

There was a smile in his voice. Before he could question, Will returned to his previous exploration and Hannibal was once more lost. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to sob in relief and frustration. For Will, Hannibal wanted to beg. Instead, all he was able to do was shout into the darkness and take hold of the sheets in a violent grasp.

Will's lips. Will's fingers. Will's cruel hands. Will's tongue and teeth. There was nothing in Hannibal's mind but these. He was nothing but Will. The profanity Hannibal hissed into the otherwise silent room when Will stopped again only made him laugh. “The summer I turned fifteen, I worked at a Taco Casa in Vicksburg, Mississippi—worst fucking job in my life.”

Hannibal tore the sheets the next time Will brought him to the edge, only to cease all movement. Except for the lips against his stomach as Will spoke. “The first time I fell in love, actual love and not lust, was when a beautiful man—a dangerous and terrible man—saw me for the monster that I am and invited me into his home, brought me to his bed, gave me his heart to do whatever I wanted with.”

Will almost waited too long, lost as Hannibal in pleasure. When he pulled away, he had to hold Hannibal down as his body shuddered with aborted release. Tears trailed down Hannibal's temples as he caught his breath. “I'm responsible for the deaths of fifty-four people who did nothing but make the mistake of taking the same train I boarded. I should've known better. I shouldn't have taken such a stupid risk.”

Hannibal managed to get his hands on Will. Limp curls, damp from sweat, fell through his fingers. A greedy mouth pulled away from him only to kiss his palms. Hungry turned reverential. Demanding faded into benevolent. He didn't know which was a worse torture, at this point. “Our daughter is alive because of the life Nigel gave for her, the blood I would gladly spill over and over again. For her. I was ready to die for her then, and I am now. I always will be prepared to give my life for hers.”

Everything hurt. Pleasure so sublime it turned to excruciating pain. Not often had Hannibal indulged in such debauchery. How quickly Will brought him to his limits. Beyond. There was no fight remaining in him as Will pushed Hannibal onto his stomach. There was no resistance left in him. Will was all around him. Surrounding him. Covering him. Filling him. So full of Will that Hannibal couldn't recall how it felt to be without him. “I've never had my heart broken, Hannibal. It's never come close to being broken. But it's yours now. You can do whatever you want to it. To me. I'd let you. I'll let you do everything, Hannibal.”

Will laughed, panting into the hair at Hannibal's nape, as he began his sweet torment anew. This time, he didn't stop. Not until Hannibal's body gave out. Gave in to him. Will only

stopped once he himself was satisfied, wringing everything he could out of Hannibal. Before the sun rose, Hannibal lost himself in Will. A strong, calloused hand wrapped around his throat. It didn't squeeze, it didn't sink sharp nails into the vulnerable column of muscle and artery. But it could, and Hannibal shivered with the potential. His beloved had such endless potential.

When Will was satisfied for the time being, he curled around Hannibal's shaking form. A tight cage of arms and legs keeping him in place as their hearts slowed to match a languid beat. An unnecessary precaution. There was nowhere else Hannibal ever wanted to be. As he caught his breath, gathering his impeccable control once more after Will so easily reduced it to tatters, he couldn't help the tremors along his body as lips traced a deceptively soft path up his neck and to his ear.

“The first thing I can remember wanting to be *really* was an archaeologist.”

Hannibal could just make out what kind of smile would be curling those red lips in his mind's eye. He chuckled at Will's daring. The absolute cheek. No one else would have the courage to do what Will just eagerly did. Lacking guts and spine needed for such an act of sublime desecration. And Hannibal wouldn't allow just anyone such liberties. Of course, Will knew this. Knew and exploited. Anyone else would have had their throat bitten out.

It was with Will's laughter against his marred neck that Hannibal drifted off into a satisfied slumber.

He woke again to an early morning sky full of peach and lilac. Beautiful. A reprieve before swollen gray snow clouds inevitably blew in. Soft touches brought him further into consciousness. Caressing now instead of exploratory. He laid a hand over the one scratching across his chest as if he were a pet. Lips found his shoulder and he sighed, settling deeper into Will's hold.

“Good morning,” Will whispered as he rested his forehead where his lips had passed. “Again.”

“Good morning, Will.”

“Sleep well?” Will sighed and held him tighter.

“Very much, thank you.” Hannibal lifted his hand to kiss. “Today already has the quality of a dream.”

“Almost too perfect to be real. I know what can make it better.” Will's free hand trailed along his arm.

“Oh?”

“I woke up with cravings.”

“I assume you mean other than those you indulged in earlier?”

Will hummed his assent as his fingers tickled down Hannibal's side and over his hip. “Something I haven't had in probably more than ten years, but I know you'll be up to the task.”

“Whatever you want.” Anything.

“Make me kidneys and sweetbreads.” Will kissed his cheek. “Please.”

An elated thrill ran down Hannibal's spine and he rolled over to give into his urge to touch Will, cradling his stubble-roughened jaw in his palm. Instantly, he had a recipe in mind. “Southern style?”

Will nodded and pulled him in for a kiss. “Just like my dad used to make. Tossed in flour with salt, pepper and garlic. Fried in butter. All things terrible for you, and delicious.”

"Delicious things often are," he said with a kiss to mark his point. Hannibal was never one to withhold something from himself. Nothing he ate ever made him feel guilty. What was the point of life if one didn't enjoy themselves? He lingered in Will's arms a few minutes more before he left their bed in search of pajamas. “Very well. I'll need some time for prep work, but you will have your requested dish by breakfast. Or perhaps brunch, since Mischa will be over.”

As Will took his time waking and using the bathroom, Hannibal slipped through the dark house to the kitchen. They should have an hour more, or so, before Katinka woke. He would get started on their meal before collecting her. When he opened the refrigerator to inventory what he had to work with, two sealed containers awaited him that he did not recall putting on the shelf. Upon inspection, he couldn't help smiling as warmth spread through his chest. One held two kidneys, fresh and ready for cleaning. The other was filled with a good amount of sweetbreads, soaking in buttermilk.

Hannibal set about getting ingredients for quiche. A nice Fontina he had picked up the other day. The last of the plump morel mushrooms Will had the uncanny ability of rooting out. A complexity of flavors that would pair well with the meat Will so graciously prepared for him. The kidneys didn't take long to clean. They were excellent specimens. The sweetbreads cooked well, dusted in flour and spices. When the components were finished, Hannibal poured it all into a pie crust to bake.

By the time he brought Katinka downstairs, given her a bottle and perhaps Will would be out of the shower, the quiche would be close to done.

Katinka was just starting to fuss when he came into her room. Hungry and lonely and wanting attention. With a soft greeting whispered against her wild hair, Hannibal took her from her crib to start her morning routine. Too cold for a sundress. It was a hindrance he lamented for only a moment as he picked an outfit of soft pants and a fuzzy sweater.

“One day, I hope soon, I will take you and your papa somewhere warm.”

He smiled at her attempts of escaping her nappy, dodging the pants one leg at a time. Katinka giggled and shrieked, delighted as he tickled her toes she freed from her booties with a strong

kick. He amended his earlier estimation when it became clear that the quiche would be teetering on overcooked by the time Katinka allowed them downstairs.

Their meal was safe, filling the kitchen with its wonderful scent. Will managed to arrive before them, adjusting the temperature on the oven after he checked the quiche. Fresh from the shower, languorous in his seat at the breakfast nook. Not so bright-eyed, but that's what coffee was for. There was a new cup awaiting Hannibal and a kiss for Katinka.

Katinka pawed at Hannibal's sweater as he gently swayed side to side while her formula warmed. Tiny fingers slipped into the weave of soft wool. He rested his cheek against hers, basking in the quiet of their morning. It was strange. This coexistence. Orbiting of multiple bodies that intersected and conjoined but never seemed to crash. If Hannibal pondered such a thing just a few months ago, he would have thought himself incapable of such harmony. Incapable of, and unwelcoming to, such a scenario.

Now, he wondered at the notion of not having them. Simple moments. Fleeting interactions. Gone and past in an instant. When he returned to his work, established his practice, would he lose this ritual? Pushed to weekends and holidays? Would he suddenly marvel at Katinka's growth and not recall the process? It was a strange and discomforting thought that he chose to put away. For now.

As he tested the formula and then helped Katinka with her bottle, the phone rang. *The* phone. A generic alert. Nothing he nor Will chose for theirs. Easily distinguished. Will pulled the phone out of his pocket and smiled at the screen. Another call for Mason Verger. He was a much sought after man, even in death. Clients and meetings and contracts waiting to be fulfilled—all common demands for any business man. However, this particular phone only had one area of Mason's affairs attached to it.

Will's smile never wavered as he received the call, voice taking on not the smooth cadence that he normally spoke with, but the lilt of a northern Mid-Atlantic accent. The kind of drawl and emphasis to his words that had made Hannibal want to tear Mason's throat out but now was a delight to hear coming from his cunning lover. It was always a pleasure to watch Will work.

“Mason Verger's phone, Mr. Verger's assistant speaking. Yes, Mr. Verger had a bounty in place. It is no longer active. No, I am not at liberty to disclose such information. Confidentiality, you understand. However, I can confirm a team fulfilled Mr. Verger's contract three weeks ago to his satisfaction. Yes, I am aware that the website has yet to be updated. The site will have a final update very soon. Thank you for your interest. Have a lovely day.”

Hannibal smiled as he marked and remembered Will's choice of words throughout the exchange. It seemed his beloved was nearly ready for the last installment of their plan. The ending of Mason Verger. What would the world think, when they finally laid eyes on him? The first of Hannibal's exhibits. Would they all cower, or marvel at the beauty he and Will created? He was excited to find out.

The doorbell rang, announcing Mischa's arrival. Will slipped the phone back in his pocket and stood. Before going to answer the door, Will came to them. He buried his nose in

Katinka's hair, a sweet, satisfied little smile pressed to her curls in a kiss. Only after kissing Hannibal's cheek did he step away from them to receive their guest.

Anticipation was a sparking, rumbling thing. Hannibal could feel it building. His Will was unleashed. Untethered and fearless now. Mason Verger would be the beginning. Hannibal couldn't guess as to where their inspirations might take them. Endless possibilities. Ever-growing potential. It left him breathless to consider it all.

But first, brunch.

* * * * *

The days grew shorter, darker. Such a miserable autumn no longer hinted at a harsh winter. It was almost upon them. Snow, rain, sleet, frost—the weather made staying indoors a mandatory condition. But they managed to find ways to make use of their time forced inside. Honestly, there was little else Hannibal would rather be doing. Terrible weather or not. The notion was a bit ridiculous, but it was true. Even after so many weeks together, of knowing one another so intimately, Hannibal was still so fascinated and captivated.

He took his time just admiring Will. A new experience to savor that he refused to rush. Although he loved every part of Will Graham, from the way he could be completely still and drawn deep inside himself to the fiery and terrible way he could cut with words and wit, there was something to be said of passive and tranquil Will.

So motionless. At peace. A doll Hannibal could position and manipulate any way he wished. Beautiful. Achingly gorgeous. Hannibal had administered an anesthetic once Will was comfortable on the table. Fast-acting to numb the parts that needed to be. Hannibal smiled as he leaned over Will's prone body, answering his soft grin.

He bowed closer before he lifted his surgical mask in place. “Do you trust me, Will?”

“Yes.” The declaration was spoken in a soft, breathy voice. No hesitation. No lie.

“Then sleep. When you awake, you will be sore and terribly groggy but you will no longer bear the mark of someone so unworthy of you.” As he fit the breathing mask over Will's nose and mouth to begin the final countdown of anesthesia, he heard Will's whispered consent.

“Do what you will with what you take from me.”

Hannibal's smile beneath his mask made his face ache as he watched Will finally succumb to the drugs. Will felt nothing, knew nothing, of Hannibal's scalpel as it was set to his back. All Will had seen was the pristine operating room Hannibal made in their basement. He was given a tour of Hannibal's work space, shown the tools of his trade and hidden rooms where he kept his freezers. It was there, seeing hints of dark delights and unleashed urges, that Will asked Dr. Lecter for help.

Hannibal had been honored by the shy request, humbled and shaken by Will's faith in him. He would give Will's request the care and love it deserved. And when he woke, he would be upstairs. Healing in their bed and the Verger brand nothing more than a foul memory.

* * * * *

On a tempestuous afternoon, Hannibal found himself shut away in his office. Some progress had been made on his psychiatry practice, but that wasn't what had stolen his attention as soon as he sat down after lunch. The hospital was still a tangled mess after Mason's interference. Nigel's lawyers were still waiting on official paperwork to be filed. No longer at a standstill, but the pace was still frustratingly sluggish. And yet Hannibal felt a sprig of zest in his heart, renewed excitement sprouting, as he read over his emails.

There were promising leads concerning the lost remains of Gabriela Ibanescu.

Unidentified. Unclaimed. One of the lost and forgotten. She was among those that were set aside in cold storage after no one came forward. The body fit the description of the photo Hannibal supplied. Of course, these developments were all unofficial until Hannibal approached the proper channels. But that should only be a matter of a few phone calls to the right people. Now that he destroyed the obstacles in his way, collecting Gabriela wouldn't be too difficult a task.

He and Will would have to return to Druskininkai. A day spent looking at the dead in hopes of recognizing one of their own. Grim, but necessary. Hannibal closed his email and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. A potentially damaging task for Will, but Hannibal would be beside him throughout the entire ordeal.

As if thinking of him summoned him, Will slipped silently into the room. Slow and careful with his movements. He was still healing from the small operation he endured only a few days before. Hannibal was about to chastise him for wandering about instead of resting when he noticed Will had a purpose for seeking him out. Will passed him his phone without a word, though he came to wrap his arms around his shoulders.

“Hello?” Hannibal waited for a reply and only heard quiet puffs of breath. He leaned back against Will's warmth, curious to what his lover brought him.

“Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal paused in his petting through Will's soft hair, taking in the smoky, feminine voice. American. Not so much shy, but guarded. “Is this Margot?”

“Yes. Will has finally been able to catch up a little and told me a bit about you. I wanted to officially introduce myself. Well, as much as that can be done over the phone. I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all. It is nice putting a voice to the idea I have of you.”

“Likewise.” Silence again and when she returned, Margot sounded strained. A catch in breath as she pushed her emotions down and away. A practiced and perfected action. “Will told me what happened to him. What you and your family have been put through.”

“Not one amongst us escaped your brother's machinations, it would seem.”

“I'm...” Margot wasn't crying. She was too used to pain to break so easily. “Nothing I say can make what happened hurt less. It all feels so inadequate.”

Hannibal smiled at the trickle of emotion in her voice. Sadness for Will and Hannibal, but there was anger smoldering beneath. He imagined it would have been a sight to behold if Margot had killed Mason herself. “You and I know how little sympathy can matter. Still, I appreciate your concern. I must convey my own, Margot. Do try not to let what Mason did trouble you. It's not good for the baby.”

She scoffed. “Easier said than done, doctor.” Another lapse into silence. Charged and building and his curiosity wasn't disappointed when she spoke again. “When the time comes, will you bring Will to me?”

Hannibal rather liked her choice of words. As if Will was his to make final decisions for. To keep. To look after. “Is that what you want? For us both to be there for such a momentous occasion?”

“Of course. I feel like you're family. It doesn't seem right, separating the two of you, that you wouldn't be with us. You take care of Will, Dr. Lecter. So Will can take care of me.”

What a lovely thing to say. How could he refuse? He smiled and turned to Will, pulling on a curl just to watch it spring back into place against his cheek. “Then it would be an honor to join you, when you call for us. And please, Margot, call me Hannibal.”

Chapter End Notes

A few things:

This part is called "The Wolf's Mate" because it now is focusing on not so much the way Hannibal hunts and kills, his revenge, but the way he is with Will. Especially now that there are no secrets between them. Will knows now what Hannibal is. He's accepted and embraced him, and now will experience all that entails. And vice versa. A bit obvious, but I couldn't help myself after the previous part's title. :D I wanted to explore the beginnings of the Murder Husbands and Murder Family. I hope you all like it.

I've been thinking about this dinner scene since pretty much the beginning of the story. I wanted it to be a kind of Alternate Universe/Reality type of mirroring of the dinner scene from the show between Will, Molly, Wally and Jack. To me, that was a very bittersweet scene and rather hard to watch. It was Will trying to be something he's just not. Forcing himself to have a family he's just not part of, no matter how hard he tries. This time, in this story, he's long ago embraced his murderous urges and happened to find someone to love who has similar desires. With a family who loves him as he is. I wanted to explore the idea of Will, who never really understood the concepts of love and family, finding a Murder Family and enjoying something so mundane as dinner (but

laced with a darkness he's allowed to enjoy.) I hope you all liked it because I loved writing it. :D

So...This was why I included the scene with Hannibal's very creative Q&A in this story, as well. :D I always envisioned Will biding his time and deciding to answer Hannibal when he least expected it. I hope the scene wasn't confusing or awkward or boring to you all. I just really liked the idea of Will finally answering Hannibal, some trivial answers and others were secrets kept close to his heart, after he no longer had to hide who he was. Also, if you all managed to forget, I really hate writing sex scenes. I find them repetitious and boring most of the time and would rather spend time and effort on the emotions surrounding sex than the act itself. I was playing around with style and I hope it was interesting.

Now that Hannibal's Person Suit is well and truly gone when he's around Will, I wanted to go a little more into how strange he and Will are together. They have such a dark and obsessive love for each other. It suits them, but it is a rather intense thing. I thought about Will's brand removal a lot. I feel like this would be yet another consummation to them. For Will to voluntarily go under Hannibal's knife and for Hannibal to treat it as something sacred.

Since Mr. Lecter, I imagined the phone call between Hannibal and Margot a lot. I hope you all enjoyed that little hint of things to come.

I hope anyone passing by enjoyed this chapter. More murder fluff to follow! See you Thursday! In the meantime, please, please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! Sorry for the delay. There is a lot going on in this chapter. For a while, I contemplated breaking it up into two chapters but decided against it in the end. While a lot content, it doesn't call for breaking it apart. This is kind of a timestampy thing that covers some missing moments in Mr. Lecter and also delving into Hannibal's thoughts about certain characters. I hope you all like what I did. One last thing, I just want to thank Stralovat, EmilyElm, Imanerdandliketoread and ropaola for taking the time to leave such lovely comments. You're always so kind and I look forward every update to see what you thought. I really appreciate it. :D
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nineteen

Hannibal sighed as he settled into his seat. An afternoon of sightseeing before catching a plane could prove too hectic for most, but he took the somewhat rushed schedule in stride. What little time there was between flights was used to its best potential. Perhaps, another trip could be taken to get the full experience of Morocco. A tempting thought he gently laid aside for another time.

An attendant stopped by his seat, cheerful and polite even after several hours on land and air. After a brief exchange, she handed him two glasses of champagne and left to see to other travelers. Laughter, tired and sweet, came from his right and he looked to Will with curiosity.

Will took the offered drink. “It's strange, but amazing, hearing you speak Spanish.”

Hannibal smiled as he took a sip, the alcohol a cool relief after such a long morning of travel. “Is my accent atrocious?”

Will scoffed, balancing his drink while keeping Katinka settled on his lap. “As if there's anything you do that's less than perfect. Your accent is that of a fluent speaker, that's what's strange. Coming out of a big Lithuanian guy.”

Hannibal sighed again and shook his head, unable and unwilling to hide his amusement. He shrugged as he took another drink, pondering whether or not to ask for another glass or just steal the full flute Will ignored thus far. “My mother insisted we learn Italian. Spanish isn't so different, phonetically.”

Putting his glass aside, suspiciously close to Hannibal's seat, Will gathered up Katinka to lay against his shoulder. “Will you insist she speak Italian?”

“Of course. Amongst other languages.” Hannibal took Katinka's hand, smiling when she wrapped a tight grip around his finger. “Obviously, she will need to know Lithuanian and English. Romanian, if she wishes to learn her mother's tongue. Japanese and Italian. Spanish is always good to know.”

“Don't forget French,” Will said and he was half joking.

“I didn't.” Hannibal was not.

They shared a look, delicate tendrils of wistful hope weaving between them. Still so new, planning a life that concerned more than just himself. An addictive, thrilling, experience. Will's tentative desire something Hannibal suspected he would never not find charming. In time, Will would grow to understand and accept his new life. One day, he would accept that anything he could ever want was his to take. Until then, Hannibal looked forward to convincing him.

And there was no better time than now for Will to settle into his new life. They were on vacation, after all. Hannibal couldn't help smiling and massaged Katinka's tiny fingers. Sleepy, borderline cranky. Blissfully not working herself up into a squalling mess, as of yet. But they still had eight hours left of traveling before they reached their destination.

* * * * *

Hannibal exited the small airport, sauntering after Will. It was late, though the sun had yet to set. The days were longer here. Warm without being uncomfortable. He smiled as he watched Will set what they carried onto the plane on the sidewalk and tilted his face up to the sky. Soaking in the sun and letting the cool breeze wash over him. To think, it was -5°C the December day they left Lithuania. Winter arriving harsh and unforgiving when they began making travel plans.

It was summer in Argentina.

Hannibal sighed as he soothed Katinka. She was tired and hungry and Hannibal didn't know how much longer she would stay quiet in her fussiness. He couldn't blame her. It had been a long, eventful day. At least they didn't have to contend with lots of baggage. Hannibal had made arrangements for their things to be sent ahead. Still, it never hurt to double-check.

“Do we have everything, Will?”

“Yes. Now we just wait for our ride.”

“A car was sent?”

“I guess?” Will shrugged and slipped his hands into the pockets of his tan slacks. Relaxed and handsome in his lighter clothes. “She said for us to not worry about anything, once we landed. I texted her when I grabbed our bags.”

Hannibal took his eyes off Will to scan the parking lot. Small, but busy. They arrived at a time when thousands of tourists poured into the country daily. Even a non-commercial airport

such as this would have heavy traffic. Not heavy enough that Hannibal didn't notice the Prius that made a circle through the parking lot to pull up along the sidewalk where they waited. A woman stepped out to greet them. Not the one he expected, but Will seemed to know her. Know and celebrate her appearance.

“Alana! I am so glad to see you!” Will pulled the laughing woman into his arms for a tight embrace and she kissed his cheek before pulling away. He took her delicate hand in his and brought her before Hannibal. “Hannibal, this is Dr. Alana Bloom. She's a friend, and sometimes colleague, of mine when I worked for a stint at Quantico. Also, she was Mason's psychiatrist at one time. Alana, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, my fiancé. And this is our daughter, Katinka.”

Dr. Bloom was as lovely as her name suggested. A petite thing. With hair of shifting shades of kobicha and russet. Eyes a cold, clear blue that Hannibal couldn't help comparing and contrasting to Will's. Skin a golden peach from her time away from the dark and dreary northern states. But there was a hardness to her, hidden beneath her sweet smile and words of welcome. A fierceness she tried to hide in mixed company.

Hannibal wondered what she must have been like, before the shadow of Mason Verger fell over her quiet existence.

Alana smiled even brighter at Will's announcement and shook Hannibal's hand. “It's wonderful to meet you.”

“Likewise, Dr. Bloom.”

“Please, just 'Alana.'” She motioned for Will to follow her after she took up one of their bags. “Let me help get your bags in the trunk.”

Hannibal followed behind them as Katinka yawned and turned her face into his neck. “I hope you and Margot don't mind us tagging along with Will. I heard so much about Margot, I insisted on meeting her. With everything she has been through, I couldn't help feeling concerned for her and the baby.”

Her smile faltered as she came around to the trunk. Alana wasn't angry, not at them anyway, more shocked to find she and Margot were no longer alone. There was no longer a need to hide, to look over her shoulder. “Not at all. After Will told us what's been going on for the last few months, *we* would have insisted on meeting *you*, had you not already made plans to come. Margot's so excited to see you all. There's a car seat in the back, if you want to get Katinka settled.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal opened the back passenger door to slide in beside the promised car seat, hushing Katinka when she fussed at being moved.

Just as he settled her and adjusted into his own seat, Will and Alana joined him. As he patted Katinka's stomach, lulling her to sleep, they were driven away from the airport. Away from the bustling city and past smaller towns and villages. Far from civilization. Protected from spying eyes and ill intentions. Alana was quiet as she drove, Will basking in the silence as he thought over his reunion with Margot. Hannibal was content to watch it all from the backseat.

They left the highway for sprawling country roads. Alana decided to pierce the silence. “I'm shocked you haven't started your lecture yet.” She glanced to Will, smile growing at his confusion. “A reprimand that starts with, 'I told you so?'”

Understanding tinged Will's answering smile with sadness and he shook his head. He caught Hannibal's eyes in the rear-view mirror and explained, “I warned Alana to not get involved with Mason. Before all this started. He suddenly started shopping around for the best psychiatrist money could buy. Of course, Dr. Bloom's name came up.”

Alana sighed as she maneuvered around traffic. “Hind-sight is twenty-twenty, and all that. Now it's all so obvious that he wanted me there as an alibi, to paint Margot as the unstable and violent twin who was planning his death.”

“He didn't count on you becoming close with Margot,” Will offered as some kind of comfort.

“I almost lost her. She tried to tell me, get me to see. *You* tried to tell me what he was capable of. After the accident and you both were gone, he grew completely unhinged. Protected by money. He bought every cop and agent I met. I've worked with disturbed minds before, but Mason scared me. I quit, cut all ties.”

“I'm sorry you had to face all that alone.”

“I wasn't for very long. A month, or so, later, Margot called me. Just once. She gave me one more chance, told me where I could meet her if I wanted to be with her.”

“What?”

Alana laughed and glanced Will's way. “She said you would be angry that she did that. But I didn't let her risk herself for nothing. Slowly, I went completely off-grid. Quit Georgetown and Quantico. Closed up my house, canceled all payments I could. Before Mason found me, I left the country. To Johannesburg.”

“South Africa? Was that where you stayed?”

Alana nodded, smiling at her memories. “For the better half of a year. It was indescribable, Will. Like a honeymoon. We were safe and in love and excited for the baby to get here. But then Margot 'sensed' she was being followed. She kept it from me for a day, thought it might be hormones making her paranoid. I told her she had the most experience with Mason and to trust her gut.”

“That's when she called me when I was living in Bucharest.”

“Yes. We hid in Iceland for a few weeks, before coming to South America. I'm sorry for what happened, Will. If we had called sooner...And please don't be angry with Margot for calling me.”

“What happened isn't anyone's fault but the people who did it. And I'm not angry.” Will found Hannibal's eyes once more in the mirror's reflection. “Having support of those you love

makes a situation like this easier. I wouldn't have wanted her alone, or kept you two apart. I'm actually happy you were with her."

Hannibal watched and listened to Will interact with shades from his past voraciously. Fascination once more took hold of him, embedding barbed hooks so deep inside him that he would never truly be free. A new version of Will to add to his collection. So many different variations. Like a closet full of skins which Will perused before slipping into the one that was most appropriate. A Will for every occasion.

Hannibal couldn't deny that he enjoyed seeing them all. Appreciated their make and fit, but there was also a wicked kind of amusement in knowing Will the way he did. Being privy to the ruthless, breathtaking entity beneath his disguise. Knowing the play put on for what it was. For Alana Bloom, Will was a tame, doe-eyed boy. Gentle and coaxing. This Will instilled the need to protect, to champion. To save. But not in the way Will once tried, and succeeded, in calling to Hannibal's better nature. He wasn't showing his belly, making himself small. This Will catered to a woman like Alana's sensibilities. Just harmless enough for her to feel safe, calling to her need to help. Amazing. Beyond satisfying to watch.

His entertainment lasted all the way to the end of the trip. Their winding road led them around a large lake and up to a lovely house. Settled into the trees that spread into dense forest. Mountains enclosing the whole property. Secluded and far from the tourist-infested beaches they past long ago. Hannibal took in the beautiful countryside and knew Will was already making plans to utilize the lake and warm weather while they stayed.

He followed Will as Alana brought them to the house. Everything was polished, aged wood and open areas. Large windows brightened every corner and gave a spectacular view of the lake and dock. They had just entered the foyer when Hannibal heard movement from further within. A quick gait, excited and hasty to welcome them. Margot Verger came from the house beyond and seemingly out of Hannibal's imagination.

Her photos didn't do her justice. Perhaps in a bid to change her appearance somewhat, her hair was no longer pin-straight and to her waist. The curls she had now suited her, Hannibal thought. Pregnancy and being with the woman she loved made her seem like a completely different person. Not so stark and sharp. Open and soft and easier to smile. He watched Will take her in, all the changes they both must have went through to get to this moment. Will was so gentle with her, unsure of where to touch her lest she break. Silly boy. She was like Will, it would take much more to break her.

They hugged, Will mindful of the substantial bump between them. A kind of relief came over him. As if seeing her, knowing she and the baby were unharmed, finally cemented for Will the fact that they all were safe.

"I'm so glad you're okay." Margot pressed her face into his shoulder, taking a moment to reign in her emotions. She pulled back to look him over, tracing a careful touch along the scar on his forehead. "When you told me what happened...I feel terrible. I'm so sorry, Will. I'm so sorry you got dragged into all this, that you had to go through that on your own."

"It wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault. And I wasn't by myself." He smiled, squeezing her hand before turning to Hannibal. He took Katinka when Hannibal held her out

to him. “I've been waiting for a long to time to introduce you face to face. Margot, this is Katinka and this is Hannibal. They're part of how I made it through these past few months.”

“She's so beautiful, Will.” Margot smiled and took up Katinka's hand, wistful and enchanted as she studied the baby—from her ash blonde curls to the puckered pout of her mouth. She only tore her eyes from Katinka to settle on Hannibal. Margot came to him, as docile and graceful as a deer. Skittish now that they finally met. “We talked over the phone, but seeing you in person is a little overwhelming. Thank you for taking care of Will. He's the closest friend I've ever had. And I'm so sorry for your family's loss. If there is anything I can do, for what my brother did, don't hesitate to tell me. It's not enough, won't ever be enough, but I wanted you and your family to know.”

Hannibal took up her hand, keeping her in his hold after a friendly shake. Her pulse was elevated, temperature higher than average—as to be expected for a mother-to-be. “That is very kind of you, but it wasn't your debt to pay, Margot. And I require no thanks for taking care of Will. His health and best interests have been, and shall always be, one of my top priorities.”

Margot kept hold of him as she begun a small tour of where they would be staying. Hannibal could do nothing but follow after her. Since he first laid eyes on Margot Verger's photo, he had been intrigued. He wouldn't pretend otherwise. The story Freddie Lounds wove of the events that took place that fateful night at Muskrat Farm always struck him as exaggerated fodder to entice the masses into clicking more links. As much as Lounds fed her readers' morbid curiosity, she never revealed too much about Margot.

A tale of a naïve girl, taken advantage of due to her fragile state of mind and layers of mental illness. The story Mason blinded everyone with. Painted as the unreliable narrator of her own story. An obvious ploy to discredit the victim long before she could speak out against her abusers. He wondered, when the time had come, if Margot would have personally brought Mason to slaughter had he and Will delivered him to her. It would have been therapeutic for her. A beast that tormented her put down by her own hand. Lost opportunities, but Hannibal couldn't bring himself to regret Mason's end too much.

Their hostesses continued the tour at a pace that wouldn't strain Margot. Hannibal appreciated the kitchen, all brushed steel and aged wood painted a dark green. The pantry looked to be stocked, but the lack of fresh scents told him the women of the house didn't do much cooking. A shame. They passed through the cozy living room and he smiled at the antlers mounted about the walls and hanging in a small, intricate chandelier.

It must be Fate calling.

He and Will would be staying on the second floor. The room was large enough that Hannibal suspected the lake house was once used as a resort before Margot purchased it for her own needs. A veritable suite catered to their personal comfort and privacy that led straight into Katinka's room. While their room was gray stone and dark Jacobean wood, the space made for Katinka was golden pine and light, airy colors.

“We put away everything that arrived earlier this week. Katinka's clothes are all in the closet and dresser, and we stocked the bathroom and changing station. I hope you don't mind our

choices," Margot said as he looked about the room.

Hannibal glanced back the way he came when he noticed Will was no longer trailing behind him. He smiled as he watched Will show Katinka the view from their window, pointing out the shimmering waves beyond and the birds that drifted by on the cool breeze. Katinka barely cared, hiding her face against her father's shoulder. Hannibal gave her another five minutes, if that, before she dissolved into a fussy terror in need of a nap.

"Not at all. You have made traveling as painless as possible for us," he thanked them both.

Alana chuckled as she straightened the soft blue blanket in the crib with an absent-minded concentration. "It's the least we could do. And it was great practice."

When Will joined them once more, they continued on. A lovely hideaway. Quiet and secured by the natural barriers surrounding it. An isolated paradise. Everything a growing family would need while keeping the dangerous world at bay. Will wasn't as cheerfully horrified by Margot's sense of comfort and taste as he was with Hannibal's, but he could see how badly Will wanted to tease when they came to the serene pool room. Just as Will buckled to temptation and started in on the insanity of an indoor pool when one lived on the shores of a glacial lake, Katinka made her discomfort known.

Hannibal took that as his cue to give Will a chance to spend some time with Margot and Alana alone. He soothed Katinka's cries as best as he could while readying her for a small feeding before her nap. Only half her formula drank before she fell asleep in his arms. As he tucked the blanket around her and set her lamb nearby, he wondered what Will was telling his friends. What he planned to tell them.

They agreed long before they boarded the first plane to bring them here to keep the story simple. Margot would need some assurance that her brother was truly gone, but it would be best if they withheld as many details as possible. And with a person like Alana around, as much as she loved Margot and survived the harsh events she already experienced, it was paramount to keep her amenable. She wasn't from the same world Hannibal, Will and Margot came from. Alana just had the luck of falling in love with Margot. Eventually, she could possibly come around, but Hannibal wagered it would only be after Margot managed to blind her and bind them so tightly together that Alana would never think of leaving.

It was an endeavor he had every faith in Margot that she'd accomplish.

Hannibal returned to Will just as Margot handed him something. They were all relaxing in the living room. A cool breeze blowing through with the scent of jasmine and saltwater on the air. Hannibal lowered onto the plump sofa beside Will and leaned against him to look at the piece of paper he held with the utmost care. Barely a glance to the photo, Hannibal was more concerned with watching Will's reaction. It was proof, other than the day of delivery, that Will's decision to help Margot had lasting consequences. The baby, a boy if he was looking at the black and white ultrasound picture correctly, appeared to be a perfect specimen. No abnormalities present. Heart rate and oxygen levels where they should be. He was everything a child at his stage of development should be.

Will's response was interesting. No exclamations of joy. No tears or praise. He was silent in his study. Hannibal couldn't quite discern what his lover was thinking. Relief. Surprise. Mostly, there was a kind of fear rolling off him in waves that Hannibal greedily absorbed. Will would never cease to surprise him.

Margot placed one of Will's hands across her stomach. She moved it slowly for a moment before stopping. Will tensed, grabbing for Hannibal's hand with his free one. His grip was tight, gasp catching in his throat, and Hannibal was once more charmed by the man beside him. Margot and Alana chuckled at Will's reaction at feeling the baby move.

Alana came to sit beside Margot, resting her chin on her shoulder and slipped an arm around her back. “We're having a boy.”

Margot leaned back against Alana, a tired smile on her flushed face. “The Verger Heir.”

“That's all you ever wanted. I'm so happy for you. Both of you.” Will's hand lingered a few moments more before he pulled away from her hold.

Margot's stomach chose then to make her hunger known and Alana laughed. “That's our cue to start making dinner,” Margot said and patted her belly. “It's probably earlier than you're both used to.”

“The last few weeks we've had to adjust eating times, it helps with Margot's digestion.” Alana kissed Margot's cheek and stood.

“Sorry in advance. It's going to be really bland, whatever we make. I've had to be careful with anything too rich or spicy. Everything makes me sick. Alana says it's stress.”

“It is stress. You've been a ball of nerves this whole time. I'm surprised you haven't had heartburn and nausea from the beginning. Shows the strength of your nerves, I suppose.” Alana smiled at her, tracing her cheek with a gentle touch.

Margot took Alana's hand to kiss. “Well, most of my worry is gone now. Hopefully, this all should ease up.”

“If I might offer my assistance, I can make you something that should agree with your stomach troubles.” Hannibal heard enough and couldn't stand the thought of allowing their hostesses another moment of providing for them, when both women were in clear need of rest.

“We couldn't have you make us dinner, Dr. Lecter. You're our guest,” Alana said.

Hannibal stood, straightening his jacket. “It's no trouble at all. In fact, I insist. You and Margot have been isolated for months, fending for yourselves. I am happy to help you both relax. Let me take care of dinner, while you enjoy the evening. And, Alana, I think it's only fair that you call me 'Hannibal' from now on.” He gave her a winsome smile and guided her back to sitting beside Margot with gentle guidance.

Alana, obviously raised to be ever considerate, was about to put up further resistance when Will helpfully piped up. “You're not going to change his mind. And you won't be able to tear him away from your kitchen now. He's probably already planning the entire menu for our stay.”

Hannibal smiled at Will's cheekiness but otherwise ignored his teasing. “While you all catch up further, I'll start dinner. Nothing too rich, I promise.” With everyone sitting and comfortable, he turned and swept out of the room towards the kitchen.

While it seemed Alana and Margot kept their meals simple and repetitious, their pantry and refrigerator were well-stocked. It took no time at all to scan their contents and grab everything he needed. An easy preparation of cacio e pepe. Whole wheat spaghetti for added nutrition and not so liberal with the black pepper. It was sure to soothe Margot's troubled stomach.

Hannibal let himself consider the woman as he worked alone in the kitchen. He could admit that there was a time quite recently when he would have killed her. An irrational envy over her place in Will's life would have choked him until he felt compelled to remove her. Ridiculous, and not in the least hypocritical. If Will decided to kill every lover and close relationship Hannibal had before they met it would prove to be a very busy year for him.

What was surprising to Hannibal, however, was the current lack of murderous thoughts when it came to Margot and her baby. He contemplated his feelings as he set the pasta to boil and started on the sauce. It didn't take long to realize he felt protective of Margot. She was a similar creature to him and Will. A dark thing that wasn't completely a victim and not necessarily a predator.

Margot was like Mischa in so many ways.

The thought brought warmth curling in his chest. If not Hannibal, Margot was the perfect keeper of Will's child. Hannibal knew that's where Will's fear stemmed from: the thought his offspring would take after him. Another dark, fey creature. A child who thought too much, felt too much, saw too much, knew things a child shouldn't. Hannibal was besotted with the idea. And he knew, no matter what became of the boy, Margot would love him unconditionally. Fiercely.

And if Margot ever faltered in her efforts to protect him, Hannibal knew he would be there to wield the blade in her place.

* * * * *

The house was quiet. Katinka had finally settled for a nap. Will was nowhere to be found, though Hannibal could guess, and he had not caught sight of Alana since breakfast. Margot was reclining in a lounger near the still waters of the indoor pool, book in her lap but unopened. Eyes of creamy jade far away and mouth turned down in a frown. Hannibal perched on the side of the lounger next to hers and mirrored the small smile she gave him.

“How are you, Margot?”

Margot chuckled and slipped her book down the side of the seat. “Not as good as this morning, but still way better than I was even a month ago, Dr. Lecter.”

Her slightly teasing tone gave him pause and he looked her over, amused by the fire Mason hadn't managed to smother within her. “Do you refer to Alana as, 'Dr. Bloom,' whenever she trips over the line of being your partner into a therapist?”

“How'd you guess?”

Hannibal shrugged. “I'm afraid it's a trait amongst us doctors that we can't switch off. I apologize if I overstepped.”

The mischievous light in her eyes faded somewhat. “You didn't. It's the tone you get. 'The Doctor Voice,' I like to call it. Alana does it too. It's not your fault. You really can't help yourselves.” She smiled as she sipped her glass of lemon water.

“Especially since I could see something was bothering you, as soon as I came into the room. Is everything all right?”

“Nothing that won't sort itself out eventually. Will's a little upset with me.”

“Oh?”

Margot looked him over as she leaned her head back against the seat, a sleepy smile stretching her glossy lips. “You made a good choice switching to psychiatry. You have one of those faces that makes people want to confide in you. Unfortunately, this is now something Will should tell you, if he wants it known.”

Hannibal tilted his head toward her in a slight bow of acknowledgment. “Very well, I won't pry.” Before he could stand and leave Margot to her thoughts, a delicate touch to his arm kept him in place.

“There is something I would like to ask of you, but I don't want you to feel obligated to agree.” Her manicured hand fell away from him to settle on her lap. Margot took a calming breath. “Would you join my midwife and Alana in helping to deliver my baby?”

Hannibal kept his reaction tightly leashed, his voice still as smooth and unruffled as ever. Calming, beguiling. “You would give me such a gift?”

Margot kept her gaze on her hands, turning the ring on her right middle finger over and over. Less elaborate than her other pieces. Simple in design but beautiful and dear to her. A token, then, from her beloved Miss Bloom. A trinket to give her strength when she didn't have the woman beside her. The lack of eye contact intrigued Hannibal and he was not disappointed when next she spoke.

“Alana understands as much as she can, what I've lived through. Mostly because of the work she does. On an academic level, she understands. But not completely, not like Will does. From the moment we met, Will knew and understood because he recognizes from his own personal experiences the terrible things I keep hidden. As I recognize him. I recognize that in

you too, Dr. Lecter. You have your fair share of private carnage. It's why you're able to not just accept Will for the man he is, but love him. It's why I feel safe with you. I know that there's no safer place than beside Will. Beside you."

"And that protection is then transferred to your child." Extraordinary. In a similar way that she sensed the threat Mason posed to her her whole life, Margot sensed the same with Will and Hannibal and ingratiated herself to the most dangerous of the pack. She, of course, had no idea what exactly Hannibal was capable of, but her instincts told her he was powerful and a safe harbor—so long as they were not enemies. Clever, brave girl. Hannibal smiled and laid his hand over hers, stopping her fidgeting. "It would be an honor to assist, Margot. I will do whatever it takes to see you and your child through the pregnancy safely."

Margot smiled and finally looked him in the eye. "Thank you, Hannibal."

Having helped his generous hostess in some small way, Hannibal left Margot to her quiet contemplation. His curiosity was nowhere near sated after their exchange. What could have possibly come up between them that would make Will obviously upset with his friend? He doubted Will told her any specific details concerning her twin. Margot wasn't disturbed, more annoyed. Frustrated with Will and his habit of being difficult.

Hannibal smiled at the thought and sought his lover out. There were only so many places he could be and Hannibal had a hunch he knew not to ignore.

The lake on which Margot and Alana's hideaway sat was massive. A site for several small villages, resorts and villas all along its beaches. Margot picked one of the few areas that didn't have anything else around for miles. If it hadn't been for her condition of late-term pregnancy, she most likely would have selected an even more remote location only accessible by boat. As it was, the large house was a pocket of seclusion and beauty.

A shore of pebbles led to water that remained on the cool side even in the summer months. Clear and mesmerizing water that turned a striking emerald green that bled into vibrant cerulean the deeper it became. It was through such brilliant waters that Hannibal watched Will swim. He had been at it for a while, if the abandoned fishing gear at the end of the dock was any indication. Finally, worn and calmed from exertion, Will waded back towards the beach.

Hannibal watched with a dry shirt in hand, appreciating the vision Will made. Hair a tangled mess and swim trunks plastered to every muscular curve of his physique. Dripping with countless rivulets that caught the low lighting of the setting sun. Wild and unearthly. Something warned of in old tales to keep unsuspecting humans away from the water's rippling edge. An Ežerinis, come to spirit Hannibal away to the cold, dark depths.

Will nodded his thanks when he was handed the shirt. He didn't bother to dry off before pulling it over his head. Hannibal waited only long enough for Will to straighten his clothes before asking, "What happened between you and Margot that has upset you so?"

His question surprised a bark of laughter out of Will, though he really shouldn't have been surprised that Hannibal found such things out. "You don't ever waste time." Will turned to walk back down the dock to collect his abandoned pole.

“I don't see the point. Not when there's something I can do to help.”

“You don't know that.”

Hannibal shrugged and matched Will's leisurely pace along the dock. “Just by listening, I can help. The tactic has worked thus far in our relationship. Why should it be any different now?”

Will sighed and plopped down on the edge of the dock, staring into the water swirling around his ankles. “I'm not mad at Margot, not really. I assume she's the one who tipped you off.”

“Only a little.” Hannibal lowered down beside him. “She wouldn't tell me why.” He didn't press any further. In time, Will would say what he wanted and he smiled when he was proven right once more.

“Back when this whole mess started, when I convinced Margot to run from Mason, she had withdrawn a large sum of money from her family's accounts and put a portion of that into a separate, offshore bank account for me. To take care of any and all expenses I might have while on the run. It was part of why Mason attacked her that night.”

“How large?”

“Enough to counter Mason's three million-dollar bounty for Freddie's silence. Enough that I could have left the Lecter estate and disappeared, on my own.”

The thought made acid claw at Hannibal's stomach but he pushed the ugly feeling and thoughts away as he focused on the truth. The assurance of knowing Will as well as he did. “You never would have done that. As much as you hated depending on Robertus' kindness, you would rather take it than anything affiliated with Mason.”

“I didn't even know the actual amount of the account until just recently. I never looked at it. Too big of a risk.”

“And now?”

“She's giving it to me. With more on top of that. 'For keeping her and the baby safe.' She's *paying* me, Hannibal. As if I'm some kind of security detail fulfilling a job,” Will spat the word, offended by the notion of it.

Hannibal thought it was a brilliant strategy, though he didn't tell Will that. And it was yet another surprising peek into Margot's psyche. Cold, detached. Distancing herself as much as she could to protect herself. He didn't doubt that she considered Will a dear friend, not just because he was the father of her child. Even so, Margot didn't know how to be any other way. The act of providing financial support was most likely one of the only ways she could communicate her feelings, good or bad. Fascinating.

“I assume you tried to refuse?” Hannibal guessed.

“Of course. She doesn't understand why I take offense at being treated like hired help.”

“But *you* understand why she doesn't.” Hannibal leaned back on his palms and looked up at the darkening sky. Already the stars were visible. “Most of her life, until very recently I would wager, every one of her relationships has been transactional. Her safety and dignity often depended upon what she could do for the right person at the right time. This is just her way of showing her gratitude, her wish to take care of you.”

“You think I should accept it?” Will turned a surprised gaze on him. “Her family's blood money.”

“Try to not let this hurt you, make you angry. Consider this: your life was virtually destroyed in your dealings with the Vergers. A prominent career. Cherished property, all your own, that you cared for. Your identity, your life—it all had to be abandoned. Even now, your reputation is in tatters. Theoretically, you will have to start over from nothing. And while doing all this on your own is a ridiculous notion and you should know better by now, I know you would never allow me to take care of everything for you. If Margot wishes to pay you, let her. You've earned every blood-drenched dollar.” Will was silent for a long time, considering his position and Hannibal's advice. Finally, he nodded and Hannibal smiled. He sat up and brushed damp curls off Will's forehead to kiss the scar hidden beneath. “Come. Help me make dinner.”

While Hannibal prepped the ingredients for their meal, Will disappeared deeper into the house. Perhaps to find Margot. He had every confidence that Will would find some common ground once more with his friend.

* * * * *

It was strange sometimes, looking back on the last few months. Last few weeks, even. The differences between the Will Hannibal first laid eyes on compared to the Will he watched heal and fall in love with to the Will he killed with and completely shared a life with were vast and staggering. The biggest difference that was now so obvious was the Will before Mason's death. The Will before finding Margot safe.

The Will he had now was more beautiful than he could have imagined. Laid back. Teasing. Open and unafraid. No longer hyper-vigilant. It had been exhausting, living in some form of fear for so long. While terrors still kept him awake some nights, they were less frequent. The deep, dark circles under his eyes had all but vanished. A trace of them the only reminder to Hannibal that Will was once so troubled. Will slept more sound, longer on days where nothing urgent called to him. Hannibal was more than willing to look after Katinka in the mornings to let him sleep.

It wasn't a permanent fix. Hannibal was under no illusions that killing his problems would make Will all better. There were still bad days peppered amongst the good, though he was pleased to find they were sparse. Will was still the man he was before Hannibal met him. A quiet, sensitive creature of solitude and habit. Prone to bouts of anxiety and depression if he was around too many people with personalities destructive to his own. Trauma from the accident was still present. There was no cure, no quick fix, for Will and his empathetic nature. Only management.

Hannibal intended to help ease Will's burdens for the rest of his life.

Today was no different. Perhaps, more so today he was determined to keep Will's comfort steady and at high levels. Hannibal watched Will sleep a few moments more before deciding it was time to wake him. He smiled as he settled Katinka on Will's stomach and she tottered back and forth before maintaining her balance. She was sitting on her own wonderfully and he and Will waited in barely contained excitement for the day she started to crawl.

Will stretched along the mattress before opening his eyes. A sleepy gaze widened, waking that much further, at the sight that greeted it. Katinka smiled at her papa, falling forward in her haste to get to him. Will caught her before she could face-plant into his chest. He scooped her into his hold, bouncing her as he sat against the headboard. Absolute delight lit up his face as he looked her over, eyes never staying in one place too long as he tried to make sense of the headband that matched the dress that went perfectly with the tiny shoes on her feet.

“What'd Daddy do to you?” Will laughed as he took in the glittering accents and embroidered flowers, the ruffles of satin and lace that threatened to swallow her when she sat in his lap. “Tell me what Daddy did, Bell.”

They both laughed when Katinka seemed to coo that much louder, babble that much faster. As if telling on Hannibal. He had no regrets. The dress he selected for such a special occasion was something he kept from Will until now. A surprise he knew Will would love as soon as he saw her. Hunter green satin overlaid with intricately embroidered lace of the same color. A beaded bow to match. Hannibal was careful and strict when it came to her skincare regime in such a warm and sunny place. His efforts made her appear even more like a porcelain doll. Her curls had lengthened and gave off a burnished shine—like Nigel's.

When Will finally tore his gaze away from their daughter, confusion tinged his smile as he looked around. He scanned the small table in their room that was set with a large breakfast for two. Intimate and just for them while Katinka drank her bottle. His eyes lingered on Hannibal, appreciative of the gunmetal gray suit with its green accents that fit his frame with a flattering hug.

“What's the occasion?”

Hannibal sat on the side of the bed and couldn't help the chuckle that was surprised out of him. His dreamy, absentminded Will. What was he to do with him? He leaned close to take Will gently by his jaw and kissed him. The look he tried for was exasperated, reprimanding; but he knew it most likely came across as besotted and fond.

“Merry Christmas, Will.”

* * * * *

Caleb Verger was born to Margot and Alana Verger in the evening hours of a late December day. Nine pounds and eight ounces of bright red, squalling fury.

Exactly in the timeline Hannibal guessed.

It was an experience Hannibal knew he would call up from the most protected rooms of his memory palace for years to come. A first for him. Unlike death, which was violent or gentle,

swift or slow, Hannibal discovered some interesting truths. Birth was painful. Birth was terrifying in its unpredictability. A person's first experience with pain and regret and anger and comfort. All at once. A bombardment of emotions. After so long blissfully adrift in darkness and calm.

Caleb Verger came into the world angry and bloody and so full of precious life. Hannibal couldn't wait to see what mark he would leave on the world. If he would follow in his father's footsteps.

He had held him in his palms. Wiped the blood from his eyes and lips. Hannibal had helped cut Caleb's umbilical cord as Will held his son's tiny body still. Their gristly job done so Margot and Alana could enjoy the softer facets of welcoming their child into the world. Hannibal wouldn't have traded duties for anything.

Only two days in the world and already everything seemed different. How powerful these small, delicate creatures proved to be against them all. Hannibal smiled as he watched Will. Margot and Alana were in their room asleep. A much needed rest after one ordeal after another. They were happy, but exhausted, and easily gave in to Will's tentative request to look after Caleb as they recovered. He wasn't as easy with Caleb as he was with Katinka. So afraid to do the wrong thing. To break his son beyond repair. It was more endearing than Hannibal thought it should be.

Watching Will with Caleb made Hannibal ache with the sweetness of it. His shy, hesitant Will. He wanted so much to take care of the things he claimed, but was unsure how to show his love and devotion. Afraid to scare away those he wanted most with his consuming love. Will tried to dampen his devotion to make Margot and Alana comfortable, but Hannibal could see it. The dark and deadly love Will only knew how to feel.

Hannibal felt the same, looking at the infant who shared Will's lips and button nose.

“You're good with him.”

Will looked over his shoulder and smiled before settling Caleb snug in his bassinet. “I've had practice with the most perfect baby in the world.”

The way Will spoke of Katinka, the tone he always took and the look in his eyes, it made something warm and vibrant tickle across Hannibal's nerves. He came to Will, smiling as he looked over his shoulder at Caleb. He pushed a gentle finger through the fine wisps of dark hair peeking out of Caleb's swaddling blanket before he sat on the loveseat nearby.

Hannibal leaned back into the cushions and clasped his hands together over his crossed knees. “Do you think you will want more children?”

Will chuckled and shook his head. “Neither of us thought kids would be a possibility, with the lives we lead. I couldn't imagine having them before all this. Before Katinka.”

“The idea was never too appealing. Now, I can see why some would want children. To teach, to guide and protect. To love unconditionally.”

Will hummed in agreement and sat beside him. “Especially with the right person to raise a family with.”

“It's a strange desire to suddenly have, but not the worst that's ever crossed my mind.” Hannibal watched Will, taking in his unguarded ease and happiness. Will's trust in Hannibal astounded him daily. He couldn't help commenting. “You know what my first thought was, when you told me about your unborn baby with Margot. You know what my initial desire was, hearing you shared such intimacy with her.”

“Yes.”

“And you still brought me here. Let me get close to Margot. Hold Caleb in my hands as he drew his first breaths.”

“Of course I did. Why wouldn't I? Even though I want us to be in Cal's life, I don't wish to be anywhere else but with you and Katinka. There is nothing else I want, other than you. Nothing but *our* family.” Will's smile was fond and lovely. The kiss to Hannibal's jaw a sweet tease. “It never occurred to me to worry. They're not a threat to someone like you.”

“How well you know me.”

Will leaned close with a sigh, their heads bent together on the cushion as they both seemed to take a moment after the busy chaos of the last few days. It was completely understandable that Margot and Alana were passed out in their bed at the moment. A smile crawled its way along Hannibal's lips and his eyes drifted closed as Will's fingers combed through his hair. Taking a nap sounded like a marvelous idea, now that he was thinking about. Kisses pressed into his temple and he felt himself fade a little further into unconsciousness.

“I am perfectly, utterly happy with my lot in life. The first time I can remember. You're enough. Katinka is enough. Although,” Hannibal heard Will whisper against his ear right before he drifted off. “If more children are in our future, I will only agree if you can guarantee me a brilliant little boy or girl with your ridiculous eyes. Your stupid cheekbones, or nothing at all.”

* * * * *

Hushed conversation was broken occasionally by outbursts of laughter. It was wonderful to hear. There had been a cloud of hesitancy over the evening. As if their happiness could be stolen if they were too boisterous in their merriment. Hannibal was happy to watch their inhibitions fade as the night went on. They were, after all, celebrating. He picked up the large tray after placing the finishing touches on it and brought it outside where he left Will with Margot and Alana.

The veranda had been decorated for the occasion. A low table surrounded by plush cushions. Clusters of candles the only sources of light. Beyond the cozy glow was darkness. Moonlight reflected off gentle waves of the lake and a soft breeze swept by now and then to stir small chimes hanging from the rafters above. Hannibal set the tray on the table and preened at the exclamations that rose up at the sight of his offering.

“What exactly were you working on in there, Hannibal,” Alana asked as she leaned close to study the dark red mound in the center of the serving dish, nestled on a plate of some sort of salad.

“Yukhoe, served with cabbage and Korean pear.”

“That's raw beef, if I remember correctly,” Margot said as she took delicate sips of her chilled spirit.

“Very good, Margot.” Hannibal smiled as if pleased by the effort of his pupil. “Have you had it before?”

“Not this version, no. But I am quite familiar with beef tartar.”

When Hannibal went to set a smaller plate filled with meat and salad before Alana, she laughed and held her hand up to stop him. “No, thank you.”

“Are you sure? It's a very refreshing dish, perfect for special occasions. Safe to consume, even though it's raw, I assure you.”

“Tempting as that sounds, I'm gonna sit this one out. I'll stick with just the soju.”

“And what about you, Margot?” Hannibal held out the plate to her. “Will you be braver than your dear Mrs. Verger?”

Margot shrugged and took the offered serving. “I am the daughter of a slaughterhouse magnate. Not many things make me squeamish.” She smiled when Hannibal winked at her.

Will took his without having to be asked. “I'll eat anything if you made it.”

After seeing to everyone's serving, Hannibal settled down at Will's side. Will and Margot took cues from him as he gathered a few matchstick-size pieces of pear with some shreds of cabbage before collecting a strip or two of the meat with his chopsticks. Feeling generous, he decided he wouldn't dip the bite in the egg yolk he supplied everyone with in separate bowls. Best to take baby steps with these three. They ate when he did and he watched for their reactions.

Margot was delighted as she chewed, chasing it with a sip of soju. “I have to admit, I think I like this more than the French version.”

“It's really cold.” Will licked his lips, a pleased smiled teasing the corner of his mouth. “And a lot sweeter than I thought it'd be.”

Hannibal took a long pull from his glass, enjoying the way the flavors mingled together in a complex burst of salty and sweet, crisp and bitter. With the undeniable underlying hint of iron. “Frozen beef is necessary for this dish. Sliced thin before it can thaw. Tossed with soy sauce, sesame oil and honey, amongst other things. Not as hot as other dishes, but it's always been a favorite of mine.”

“I like it.” Will hid his smile behind another bite.

“Anyone have any resolutions,” Alana asked while her and Margot cuddled with their drinks.

“Not really.” Will shook his head as he made his way through a second helping of yukhoe, stealing the bowl of egg yolk that was meant for Alana's serving.

“I haven't really thought about it.” Hannibal leaned close to pour Will another drink. “Recently, I thought of ways to ensure I'll spend more time with my family. With Will and Katinka. Does that count?”

“Sounds good enough to me.” Margot raised her glass in a toast. “Mine are similar. From here on out, I'm not going to let anyone keep me from what makes me happy. Whatever it takes.” Alana smiled and kissed her on her alcohol-flushed cheek.

“That's a lovely aspiration, Margot. I hope you achieve it.”

“Likewise, Doctor.”

Hannibal watched her swallow the rest of her drink in one gulp. The alcohol he chose for their meal paired well with the meat, had the same cultural background and was not the strongest of spirits. Margot was well beyond buzzed and teetering into tipsy. Most likely, her low tolerance was due to the months abstaining from alcohol while pregnant. Hannibal couldn't help but find her rosy complexion and giggles she hid in Alana's neck charming.

Their light exchange and laughter was interrupted by an explosion of color and light. Miles down the beach, but their small party was still bathed in green from the showering sparks of fireworks. One after another flew high into the sky. A cascade of red, then purple, then blinding white. Hannibal looked at his watch and smiled as the second hand ticked over to announce the end of an hour and the beginning of another.

“Happy New Year,” he managed to proclaim before Will pulled him into a honey-laced kiss.

Alana and Margot retired soon after, crying mercy on Will and Hannibal's seemingly endless supply of energy. They made promises for a late brunch before sending them off to bed. Hours had passed since in a syrupy crawl. Gone was the artisanal, high-end soju—replaced by Dom Perignon drank straight from the bottles.

And it was at the end of the dock where Hannibal sat while working through his second bottle. Bare feet dipped into the cool water. Black slacks rolled up to his shins. His sleeves were pushed above his elbows and the top three buttons of his shirt were gone. Snapped free. Possibly lost to the dark waves below. It didn't matter. As the fireworks continued with their flower burst flares, Hannibal knew there was nowhere else, in no other condition, that he'd rather exist.

Footsteps sounded behind him, alerting him to Will's return from wading in the shallow depths. His pants were nowhere in sight. Only in black boxer briefs, damp from his exploration along the shore. Hannibal kissed his knee. Cold saltwater on his tongue. Will knelt beside him. At least he found his shirt, though it did little good opened and hanging precariously from sculpted shoulders.

Will took Hannibal's bottle and a healthy swallow of the champagne before he decided to let Hannibal be privy to the thoughts which seemed to have preoccupy him for a portion of the night. “Have you ever used your preferred animals to make yukhoe?”

“No. Do you wish to try?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. No moment of remorse asking this of Hannibal. It felt as if the champagne somehow flowed directly into his veins, bubbles popping delightfully in his blood.

“It would need to be freshly slaughtered, but I think we can work something out.” Cold fingers wrapped themselves in the opening of his shirt and Hannibal's laughter was smothered in a kiss.

The fireworks exploded long into the night to mark the start of another year to come. A haze of red that seemed to tinge the whole world.

Chapter End Notes

So, there you have it. The meeting between the Lecters and the Vergers. I hope you all liked it as I know this was something a lot of readers were looking forward to. I hope it was worth the delay. There was so much going on, I didn't want to rush it, or leave anything out. I think this story will have two more chapters. We'll see. Hannibal is a lot more detailed than Will and might have more to add.

I hope everyone who stopped by enjoyed the chapter. See you Thursday! Please stay safe, sane and healthy dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! It's dark and stormy and there's a tornado watch in my vicinity--and I have a new chapter for you. :D I think you're really going to like what happens here. I don't even want to say anything and ruin the surprise. Thank you so much to Stralovat, Imanerdandliketoread and ropaola for leaving me such lovely, wonderful comments. I don't think I'll ever be able to convey the joy I get reading your comments and I appreciate them.
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty

A few days after the new year began, the Lecters made their farewells to the Vergers. Hannibal gave Will space to speak with Margot alone, heads bowed together and their voices low. Well-wishes and plans for future reunions from Margot and reassurances that everything would be fine from Will. Hannibal had smiled against Katinka's hair as he watched the exchange, excited for the rest of his and Will's plans to be completed.

Soon, Margot and Alana would no longer needlessly worry over unseen threats.

Before returning to their frozen home in Lithuania, Hannibal surprised Will with a detour. The Lecters had owned a villa in Majorca for several generations. Secluded for such a busy island. Renovated over the long years and kept in pristine condition by a local family. Hannibal had never stayed there, personally. He never saw a reason to until now. They would spend the rest of the winter there.

It was before they made their snowbird's nest on the shores of sugar white sand and turquoise waters, when they landed in Madrid for a brief lay-over, that Will completed his design. Untraceable. Masterfully timed. When their connecting flight touched down in Palma, the U.S. was already abuzz with news of Mason Verger.

The *late* great philanthropist and heir of the Verger dynasty.

The days that followed in Will's homeland were filled with nothing but endless coverage of the murder. Censored photos on nearly every major news channel. Websites were braver with what they showed their morbidly fascinated audiences. Still, photos would never do the actual tableau justice. Even if he and Will had been the ones to take said photos. Hannibal would look at the copied material and couldn't help revisiting the memories. The beauty they created together.

In addition to removing his annoying tongue, greedy hands and the sexual organs he had been so very proud to terrorize innocents with, Hannibal had worked quickly and painstakingly to take Mason Verger apart. Under Will's guidance. Quartered and hung. Suspended on hooks. The pictures they took from the frontal view seemed to capture what was once a man, naked and tortured, with parts of his body fastened with chains to aid in the hanging. The photos from the profile, however, showed the spaces in between. Each portion kept on separate meat hooks. Every cut of Mason sized and judged for quality. No better than the pigs his family made their fortune slaughtering.

The display was beautiful and daring. Transformative. More Modernist than his usual tastes, but Hannibal still considered it perfection. Everything he had been wanting these long months of mourning. His appreciation only grew as the authorities scrambled uselessly in their attempts at taking control of the chaos he and Will unleashed.

Margot sent them a lovely arrangement full of sweet-smelling blooms that symbolized love, appreciation and friendship in the hectic time following the gruesome display of her brother. Included in the gift basket was a soft toy piglet to add to Katinka's growing menagerie. Thoughtful girl; he wished her well on the reclamation of her life.

When Margot decided to come out of hiding, so too did Will Graham have to step out of the shadows. Hannibal knew they had talked over the details of such an unveiling before they parted ways in Argentina. Margot ensuring Will's protection when she spoke out against her brother; Will giving advice when needed, resources and contacts that she could trust. It worked. Whatever Will told Margot to do, the worldwide manhunt for him ended mere days after Margot resurfaced with her wife and child.

Hannibal couldn't say he would miss the time Will spent hiding, though he was not happy with some aspects of his lover's former life encroaching on them. The contacts given to Margot now knew Will wasn't the criminal they sought, was very much alive and well and wanted to swoop back in and take him for themselves.

It was on another beautiful afternoon, halfway through their winter retreat, when Jack Crawford found his way into Hannibal's awareness.

It was such a rare thing for Will to receive calls that he thought nothing of answering his cell phone he often abandoned on random surfaces around their home. Thus began a reunion that lasted over an hour. Hannibal observed with a curiosity he didn't bother to hide. He listened to every syllable exchanged, kissing the top of Will's head on his way by when he helpfully put the call on speaker. Will curled up in the corner of the overstuffed couch and calmly listened to the evolving flood of gruffly spoken words. Apologies, demands for details of the last several months, beseeches to return to the hallowed halls of the FBI.

As Will gently reminded his former employer that even if he planned to return—which he wasn't—he worked white-collar and not serial killers, Hannibal took the opportunity to allow himself a glance into who Will was before his adventure with Margot Verger. Hannibal could see what Jack did. Even with the urges and the know-how to turn them into the inspirations they were, Will made an excellent detective. His almost supernatural ability to read people, to understand them, would make him an invaluable commodity for an organization such as the FBI.

A bloodhound who could sniff out any killer with the proper training. And under the guidance of a master like Jack? There would be no mystery he couldn't solve. Hannibal could see it. Will giving the FBI everything he had. The only way he could indulge his darkness. It would become his entire life. Pull him from his family—because there would always be another family somewhere suffering until Will helped them.

No time to shut off and shut down. Because in the time Will took to eat a proper meal, try for a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, spend time with family, friends and lovers, lives would be lost that could have been saved. All those innocents waiting to be saved. At the low price of Will Graham's sanity and health.

In another life, a place far from him, Hannibal could just make out the shape of it. A ghostly outline of his Will. Sickly, tortured by his beautiful cleverness and endless imagination. So painfully alone. Forcing himself to look at the ghastly and grotesque because he felt he had no other use to anyone else, or himself, if he didn't. Willingly chipping away at himself until nothing remained of the wonderful, sensitive soul he was born with.

“My hands are full here, Jack. Happily full, with my daughter and fiancé and *everything*,” the emphasis on that last word seemed to encompass the last few months for Will.

“Right. Dr. Lecter. Mrs. Verger mentioned him.” Jack's deep voice crackled over the speaker. His tone was hard to place. Disappointed. Wistful. Grudgingly fond. “He's aware of your gifts? Your special way of thinking?”

“Hannibal's aware of all my little quirks.” Will smiled as Hannibal sat in the chair across from him, absolutely delighted in where the conversation seemed to be heading. Again. Hannibal was anything but.

“Maybe he'll be able to talk some sense into you.” When Will snorted in reply, Jack was ready with another quip, humor teasing at the edges of it. “With talent like yours, I had to try and get you back. Dr. Lecter and your daughter are more than welcome to join you, you know that. Show them America, Will. Your daughter could have dual citizenship by the end of the year.”

Will chuckled and shook his head, smile growing as he took in the annoyance Hannibal tried to conceal. “I don't think so, Jack. It was good talking to you. Thanks for straightening this mess out, but I'm done with that part of my life. I don't miss it. Tell Phyllis I said 'hi.'” They exchanged a few more pleasantries and then Will hung up. His work-roughened hand slid through Hannibal's hair on his way by.

Alone in the living room, with nothing but the breeze blowing in through the opened patio doors and the sound of the surf just beyond them, Hannibal grabbed up his tablet to do some research. The grisly murder of Mason Verger seemed to be the only thing that had happened in recent times, as it had taken over every American news site. He sidetracked himself reading over Margot's reaction. The shrewd girl was staying tight-lipped, leaking what information she wanted when she wanted. Directing the public eye exactly where she wanted it to be. Good for her.

Jack Crawford was not hard to find information on. An impressive man, with a prolific career. In another life, perhaps, they could have been friends. Each guiding and protecting Will in their own ways. Hannibal didn't enjoy the idea of possibly having to kill this man, but he would keep on the alert now that Jack knew how to get in touch with Will. He would stay vigilant and ready for any threats.

After all, Will's continued well-being and happiness were, and would always be, Hannibal's priority.

* * * * *

Accepting responsibility for such duties led Hannibal into situations he rarely had experience with. Such as the situation he currently found himself. Once again lured onto the water by Will. It was nighttime. Katinka fell asleep long ago, with baby monitors fully charged and ready to pick up her duress. In any case, they were not too far from shore.

His Ežerinis wished to impress him. And teach him a new skill.

Will could attempt his lessons all he wanted, Hannibal knew when he was beat. They had been fishing on their little boat for not even an hour and Will had seemingly charmed two gilt-head bream into their cooler full of ice. Will cast his lure once again and Hannibal admired the stillness of him, his concentration.

“You didn't fish as a kid much, did you,” Will asked as he kept his eyes on the deceptively calm surface of the water.

“Not really. Maybe once or twice. My father preferred hunting. He took Nigel and I often when he would stay for a weekend in the cabin deep in the woods surrounding our estate.”

“Boys who learned early the importance of silence and stalking.”

Hannibal shared a small smile with Will. “After our parents died, after we came to live with Robertus and Murasaki, Nigel and I rarely hunted together. I still often stalked the woods. Even if I returned without a kill, my mind was always filled with new things to draw.”

Silence rose up once more between them. For a time, only the pleasant sounds of rippling water lapping at their boat and night insects filled the air. Then, finally, Will spoke again as he recast his line. “I've seen for myself that you're an excellent hunter. Nigel didn't have the patience you do. He didn't see the sense in waiting in quiet. He was a much more direct predator than you. Nigel had no use for games and when he struck, it was fast and brutal.”

Hannibal adored and treasured these precious moments. The times Will picked up a fine thread of existence and saw so clearly what everyone else missed. Pieced together what others might disregard as broken and unsalvageable.

Will took his time reeling in and recasting, and Hannibal became alert at the careful tone he now spoke with. “I think...What Nigel needed, what he was coming to his brother for, was something a little more delicate than his usual style.”

And Hannibal could see. Really *see*. His brother was under threat. Not by brutes and violence, but by a boy. A charming, *harmless*, boy who was turning his wife's head, turning her heart away from Nigel. The very real threat to his family being torn apart by an interloper —he would not tolerate such an attack.

Lecter men did not love easily. Nor was their love finite and fragile as smoke. It was not something so easily brushed aside. There was little doubt in Hannibal's mind that Nigel knew of Gabriela's plans. Nigel would have been painfully aware of Mr. Countryman's arrival to Lithuania. Every potential threat would have been known to him. He was coming home to Hannibal. And Nigel was going to ask for help only Hannibal could give.

He looked over Will with an admiration he didn't think was possible. His patient, alluring Will. “Though they are very similar disciplines, the biggest difference between hunting and fishing is the act of stalking and the art of luring. Nigel would have needed a lure. I can stalk, find out everything about my prey, but the lure is what would be crucial in catching that particular quarry.”

Will nodded, eyes still on the water. “The perfect bait: Gabi. Isn't that what got Charlie's attention when he approached you?”

“Yes,” Hannibal easily admitted with delight.

Suddenly, Will pulled against the growing tension on his pole. In just a few jerks and spins of the reel, Will dragged his latest catch through the water and onto their boat. A beautiful specimen. The mullet twitched and fought for only a moment as Will prepared it for storage. It's slick body glinting silver streaks in the starlight. After putting the cooler away and setting his pole to the side, Will leaned over him and trailed his lips along Hannibal's hairline.

“Perhaps, you know a little something of fishing already, Hannibal.”

Hannibal pulled him closer for a proper kiss, uncaring of where his own pole went. “Even so, I would appreciate your expertise next time I'm out searching for prey.” A shudder ran through Will at the idea of joining him, eyes dark with barely restrained want. His wonderful, clever Will was impossible. Still so shy to ask for what he desired. Afraid to trespass where he was not explicitly invited. Ridiculous. Will had been waiting for Hannibal to broach the subject, unwilling to encroach on his sacred ritual. How could Hannibal deny him? “I dream of you often, treading silently beside me on our Wild Hunt. I could not hope, much less dare to ask, for a greater honor than that from my most cherished beloved.”

Without a word and just a fleeting flutter of lips against Hannibal's crown, Will stepped away to discard his clothes and dive off the boat. It took less than a minute for Hannibal to follow after him into the black waters. He broke the surface to have his hair swept away from his face and arms loop around his shoulders. Salt and cool water and the taste of Will on his tongue. Languid kisses shared as their bodies drifted away and against one another with the push and pull of the waves.

Will only stopped long enough to murmur, “The honor is mine.”

* * * * *

Time spent away from Lithuania was exactly what they needed. After everything they had been through, the trauma suffered, it gave them a chance to begin healing. The three months abroad didn't seem real when Hannibal thought back on them. However, Will's golden tan and relaxed frame gave him proof daily that they had experienced paradise with one another, with Katinka.

However, it was time to return to their lives, to their home.

They arrived just before spring. Not so cold. The dark not so deep. Large drifts of snow were melting from the light showers. Soon, it would all give way to milder weather and blooming flowers. Hannibal couldn't wait for all the green. Castle Lecter, though still dusted with snow and icicles, was no longer impossible to get to.

Hannibal and Will stopped by Mischa's for a long-anticipated reunion and to pick up Mira before returning to Hannibal's ancestral home. They aired out the rooms and heated the house. A few groceries needed to be bought. As they worked to make ready for their family to join them, Will grew more nervous.

Will wanted the truth to be out and Hannibal gave him the support to do it, no matter the consequences that would follow.

A strange sort of anticipation gathered inside him and set his nerves aflame. Will wanted to spill all of his secrets and destroy the barriers placed between them all. Never once had he wondered if the Lecters were keeping their own secrets from Will. Hannibal couldn't wait to see how it all played out. He didn't hint at anything to Will, not after sharing himself so completely with his lover. These secrets were not his to divulge. At the same time, he didn't let his family know what Will planned.

Now the moment was upon them. They welcomed their scattered family back to the estate. Dinner was to be held later, after everyone had time to rest. Together, they gathered in the sitting room to talk over drinks. He came to Will and gave him his requested glass of whiskey before taking his seat beside him. From the determined look in his eyes, Will was going to confess his self-proclaimed sins now.

Courage, Will.

Will took a steadying sip of his whiskey neat before putting it aside. “There's something that I want to tell everyone. I don't really know how to say this. You all have given me so much since the day we met, and I'm asking something of you once again: please just let me explain myself completely before you say anything.”

“Whatever it is, you can tell us, Gabriel,” Murasaki said when everyone else only looked on with concern.

Will sighed and took comfort in Hannibal as he grabbed his hand. “I'm not Gabriel. In fact, before I woke up in the hospital, Gabriel Lecter didn't exist. I'm not Nigel's husband, nor have I ever been married. Nigel's wife's name was Gabriela, and is Katinka's mother. I have no ties to Katinka, other than I love her as if she were my own. My name is Will Graham. I was an agent for the FBI before I fled the United States. I had been living in Romania for the past six

and a half months under an alias. I was unofficially in hiding from a man I had been investigating. I was told by his sister, whom I was helping stay in hiding as well, that we had been found. I left Bucharest by train, hoping to get lost in Lithuania. It was the same train Nigel and Gabi were on.

“We were friends. But they both knew me as ‘Aiden.’ The man looking for me, Mason Verger, paid for my capture, alive or dead. Bounty hunters found me, caught up to me just a few hours into Lithuania and sabotaged the train. I'm still looking into who was responsible and have come across some new leads to check. This is why Nigel's remains haven't come home yet. Mason paid to slow the investigation, postpone and delay any progress while he looked for us. But now that he's gone, so should all the red tape, as well.

“I wanted to tell you all. From the moment I came here. But I was afraid. If I revealed who I am, and it became common knowledge, Mason would have harmed you—regardless of whether or not I left you. That's just the kind of person he was. I had nowhere else to go. And then the longer I stayed, the harder it was to leave. I came to care for all of you. I didn't want to hurt you any further than I already had. I'm sorry. Hannibal only found out everything just recently. I'm sorry I had him keep up my lies.”

Hannibal tore his gaze from Will to watch his family. They did as Will asked and let him say all he needed to. There was nothing for Will to fear. His family would never respond in anger. Not to Will. They loved him as Hannibal loved him. That alone was enough to save him. However, it really did come down to Robertus' decision. Even Hannibal would have to find a way to live with his uncle's opinion, good or ill. But if it came to losing Will, Hannibal was willing to let them go; if he had to choose. He would always choose Will. Deep down he knew it would never come to that. Robertus adored Will as if he was his own. Everyone looked to the head of their family, awaiting his thoughts. He didn't disappoint Hannibal.

Robertus settled into his chair and crossed one leg over the other with his hands clasped in his lap. His smile was a gentling kind of chastisement that Hannibal had seen many times over the years. However, this time it wasn't aimed at Hannibal but at Will. “I did not think a big reveal was necessary, but if unloading your conscience helps you with yet another monumental transition in such a short span of time, I find I, yet again, cannot deny you, Will.”

Will kept his shock masked as he looked each of the Lecters over before returning his gaze to Robertus. “You've known. For some time.”

“Yes. Though, we didn't know everything. You just filled in some blanks I was curious about. Thank you.”

“Hannibal told you.”

“*I* told you, dear boy. Remember? Hannibal had his doubts from the moment he found you sleeping away in the hospital. I gave him my blessing to satisfy his curiosity, to soothe his anger and heartache. No matter where his search led. Just a few months ago, Hannibal told me he knew without a doubt that you are not Gabriel and you did not harm his brother. As head of the family, I left it up to Hannibal to do what he would with the information he found.

Though, I am happy he spared your life. I am rather fond of you. We all are." Murasaki and Mischa murmured their agreement.

"Why make Gabriel a Lecter? If you knew I was lying to you from the beginning, why make me a part of your family? Why give me such vast access to your accounts?" Only now was Will's shock bleeding through his words. A tinge of hurt filled his questions.

"I was curious to see what would happen." Robertus looked Will over and a fierce sort of affection came into his gaze. "You are thinking what I said to you that day was a lie. Stop. I could not predict that Hannibal's affections for you would evolve into what they did. Though, I was not entirely surprised either. Even if Hannibal had not drawn you into our family further with his rather audacious courting, I would have wanted you bound to us in some way. I do consider you family, Will."

"You don't know me. You know a version of me that was never real."

"You showed us a version of truth, as best you could in the situation you found yourself. And there are so many more parts of yourself you cannot completely conceal. Not from us." Robertus chuckled and leaned forward in his chair, searching out Will's gaze until he could not help but to hold it. "You ask how I could entrust my family, our legacy, so easily unto you and there is the answer. I see you, and I know you for who are, Will. From the moment you came limping into my home. Used to clawing your way through life. Used to surviving. You are not some worthless bore, dazzled by wealth and luxury. You would rather be penniless than dependent on comforts handed to you. That had a strange effect on me. You hardly ask for anything, it makes me want to give you everything." Robertus turned to Hannibal, a firm if affectionate light in his eyes. "You are truly in love? This is not just one of your games you do so enjoy playing? You still plan to marry Will?"

"Yes." Hannibal didn't waste time or effort on flowery words. There was nothing else to say. "I allowed myself to fully commit to the love I feel for him after I found out the truth. It was never Gabriel Lecter who captured my attention, but Will Graham."

Robertus studied Hannibal, amazed at his earnest declaration. "How extraordinary." He stood and went to Will, patting his cheek with fatherly affection. "Nothing has changed, except for your name. And I find comfort in the thought that you were with our Nigel when he died. If he could not fade away in the arms of his love, then the arms of his friend are a good second best." A squeeze to Will's shoulder before Robertus stepped away. He left the room, the conversation finished as far he was concerned.

Mischa went to Will, taking his hands as she kissed his cheek. "Don't be cross with us."

"I couldn't if I wanted to." Will brought her into a hug and smiled as she tucked herself closer. "You kept secrets from me no more than I kept from you. And I'm sure Hannibal told you not to tell me." Will gave Hannibal one of his *looks* over Mischa's head that Hannibal returned with an unapologetic smile.

"I wish you hadn't felt the need to hide."

"I was trying to protect you."

“I know. I understand, but I hated it. Though, I hated the thought of you leaving more. I am happy you stayed.”

“Me too.”

Mischa pulled back enough to run a gentle caress along Will's smooth cheek. “No more secrets, Will. Amongst any of us.”

Hannibal brought Mischa into his arms and took time to bask in the joy of the moment. She squeezed him tight and let out a contented sigh against his shoulder. No more lying. No more hiding. They were all finally going to be together, completely. Hannibal could feel Mischa's relief as if it were his own. Before she left the room, he sent her off with a kiss to her forehead.

Murasaki came to stand before Will but she did not touch him. Her smile was calming, her gaze forgiving. Her acceptance of Will concealed a warning within. “I understand your necessity for deceit. The circumstances of when and how we first met—it was the most practical course you could have taken. But that chapter of your life has reached a conclusion. There is only moving forward, and I ask you to never hide from us again.”

“I promise, Lady Murasaki.” Will bowed his head in contrition.

Murasaki took him gently by the chin to meet her eyes. “I care deeply for Hannibal. I see how happy Katinka makes him. How happy you make him. I would never try to separate you from him. Without a very good reason,” she added.

Hannibal accepted her kiss to his cheek and smiled at her gentle touch over his heart. “Thank you, for your advice all those weeks ago.”

She returned his smile and smoothed down his tie, right over where she had punched him that fateful day. “You were soft in the only way you know how to be; the only way Will could respond to you. And now, you are his as he is yours. Keep each other well, Hannibal.”

“I promise.”

Hannibal watched his aunt go, after promises of more discussion at dinner. He couldn't help smiling. It all couldn't have gone more perfect. To finally be free of all the subterfuge, to have his family and Will Graham—it was exhilarating. He turned to Will and frowned when he noticed him trembling. Will's breathing was quick and harsh. He had yet to come to Hannibal. Was he angry at the secrets Hannibal kept from him? Before he could ask, Will pulled him into a rough hug. His laughter escaped harsh and smothered against Hannibal's shoulder.

“I feel like I just passed some kind of test.”

“You did. A potentially dangerous one. Congratulations.”

Will kissed him, pressing as close as he could against him. He was silent for a time, calming down from the spike in emotions that washed over him in rapid succession. When he spoke,

he kept his face tucked against Hannibal's neck. “They know, don't they? About your appetites.”

“Yes, and they join me willingly at the table.” Hannibal laid his head against Will's temple and sighed in contentment when Will ran a hand along his back. “Accepted long ago. Robertus knew the moment he laid eyes on me, all those years ago. When he came to collect the only things he had left of his brother. When he took three haunted, but only slightly malnourished, children from their crumbling home.”

“Your family.”

Hannibal kissed Will's curls, lips trailing to the fine scar on his forehead. “*Our* family.”

“I really get to have them, even after everything.” Will was shocked by such an obvious fact.

“Of course. Was there ever really a doubt? They adore you, Will.” Hannibal took up his hand to kiss, delighting in the pleased flush of Will's face. “I believe Murasaki has Katinka. Go upstairs and rest while you can. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Will nodded and took a hesitant step back. “Need any help?”

“I'll let you know when I do.”

Hannibal watched Will go, eyes on where he past long after he was gone. There was much to do and yet he couldn't make himself move. Lost in happy daydreams. Replaying the previous events over and again. Finally, he forced himself into action. Too many things demanded his attention for him to grow so distracted.

The first dinner they would all sit down to together without any secrets between them. An important event. Hannibal would give the evening all the consideration and ceremony it deserved. He and Will decided to keep it simple. Only three courses. Hannibal would begin the meal with charred baguettes, topped with lush layers of ricotta and a cherry salsa and end it with a dark chocolate strawberry tart. He double-checked and triple-checked everything from the dining set to the wine until Will found him and coaxed him out of his apron.

An important event that Hannibal would tolerate nothing but perfection from.

He needn't have worried overly so. Will took care of the dining room while he finished cooking. The candles were lit, casting golden shadows across the centerpiece made immaculate by Will's attention to detail. Some of Hannibal's favorite pieces. Twining antlers held the flickering flames. Polished black and white, they were gleaming even in the somber lighting. He smiled at the colorful burst of blooms that seemed to creep along the lace of the table runner. Japanese bellflowers, hydrangeas, tulips and daffodils. Not bad, for his first time. Will blushed when he noticed Hannibal studying the velvety petals.

Robertus was served first at the head of the table, Murasaki at his right. Mischa sat to the right of their aunt, enthusiastic for every dish set before them. Hannibal took his place to the left of Robertus, with Will beside him. Tonight and for the rest of their lives whenever they shared a meal at this table. The evening past with gentle words and heart-felt congratulations.

It was the first time his uncle had laid eyes on his charges since Hannibal told him the news of his engagement to Will.

Will insisted on helping clear the remnants of the appetizer to make room for the main course. It wasn't the most complex dish he ever made but Hannibal took a special enjoyment in creating it, plating it, serving it to his hungry family.

“Skirt steak and grilled peaches accompanied by salsify gratin.” Hannibal opened another bottle of Pinot Noir before sitting.

“Will,” Murasaki said into the silence that had until then only been broken by the sounds of tinkling cutlery. “I recall you mentioning earlier that Mason Verger is no longer delaying the investigation into the train accident. You said he is 'gone.'” She watched Will over her glass of wine, enjoying a sip of the dark liquid before asking, “Where has he gone?”

Hannibal smiled at her observations, her careful questions. He did so love his aunt, and held her in such high regard for a reason.

Will finished his tender bite, chased it with a delicate swallow of wine, dabbed a drop of blood and alcohol from his bottom lip with a silk napkin. “Where animals like him always end up, Lady Murasaki. Far away from anyone they can hurt. Untouchable and no longer able to touch.”

“A dangerous beast put down?”

“Cleanly and with no mercy.” Will smiled, boyish and shy, as he pulled a succulent piece of meat from his fork with cherry red lips.

Murasaki looked down at the cut of steak on her plate. It sliced easily beneath her knife. She lifted the rare morsel to inspect. “Such a beast met the only end it deserved. Devoured to stop it from preying on anyone else. You have a warrior-poet's heart, Will.”

She savored the delicious bite. Perfectly marinated and seasoned. Perfectly prepared. Faint traces of red left behind on antique china. Tears gathered along Robertus' lashes but they did not fall. Murasaki laid her hand over his. A small but appreciated comfort to his uncle as he looked to the empty plate they still offered to their lost lamb.

* * * * *

Hannibal gazed out his window at the sprawling grounds of his uncle's estate. Late spring brought them blue skies with hardly a cloud overhead. Everything green and abundant. Bursting with life and explosions of blooms. The day had an uncanny haze about it. Nigel and Gabriela had been laid to rest earlier that afternoon. The scent of funereal flowers clung to Hannibal's clothes even now. He stopped his staring in the direction of the family cemetery and made himself sit in one of the chairs by the cold fireplace.

It didn't seem right that Nigel and Gabriela were buried on such a beautiful day.

The wake was still in progress downstairs. Hannibal was alone, for the time being. Will was last seen rocking Katinka in their old rooms. Her furniture had been kept in the nursery for the occasions they visited. Robertus and Murasaki entertained their guests. Hannibal had remained long enough to make the appropriate pleasantries but, like Will, couldn't bear another moment among the living who mourned his twin. He shut himself away for a necessary moment to calm his heart.

It didn't take long for Nigel to come to him.

Nigel leaned against Hannibal's desk, waiting to be noticed. Fashionable and handsome as ever. He chuckled at the look he was given and shrugged. His fitted suit was varying shades of gray and slate that made the color of his hair gleam more silver and his eyes a more pronounced maroon. Nothing at all like what he was buried in.

“Figured it was a good time to gussy up.” A sob escaped Hannibal's throat and he used all the strength he had to push the rest of his emotions down. Nigel watched him with a playful tilt to his head, a glint to his eyes and a hint of teeth peeking through his easy smile. “What's this now?”

“I can't let you go, Nigel. I can't.” Nigel came to crouch down at his chair to level amused eyes at him. Hannibal could smell a hint of the cologne Nigel had been fond of. A phantom scent of woods and vanilla and ambrette teasing him. The sensation almost had him reaching out.

“It's not about fucking *wanting*. You have to.” Nigel was never one to pull his punches, to “bullshit,” as he would say.

“I feel like I've been gutted.” Hannibal wiped the tear off his cheek before it could drip from his chin.

Nigel gave him a considering shrug. “You had to say goodbye officially today. For all your gifts of compartmentalizing, you couldn't escape from lowering my bones into the ground.” He sighed and leaned back on his heels. “Any time you want to see me, I'll be here. Not many have the luxury of a fucking 'memory palace,' Han. This is the best either of us can do.” The “take it or leave it” was understood without needing to be said.

“It's not the same.” Hannibal knew it was childish and sure enough, his version of Nigel scoffed. “You're my brother, Nigel. My twin. A part of myself outside of myself. The only part of you left, I'll keep inside me.”

“That's not quite true though, is it?” Nigel smiled. “The last part of me is currently being rocked off to her afternoon nap by your gorgeous little American.”

Hannibal breathed deep in an attempt to calm his shattered nerves. “I'll love her as my own. Teach her. Guide her. Protect her. I will not fail her, as I failed you,” he promised.

Nigel snorted and shook his head. “*Christ*, you're such a drama queen. You didn't fail me. You and Will took care of the asshole responsible. Made him fucking pay, because I no longer could.” Hannibal looked to Nigel and something loosened in his chest at the approval

dancing in his brother's eyes. Nigel leaned in, close enough to touch and Hannibal could almost feel the warmth of him. “Now open your eyes, leave this fucking sad little dark corner you've been hiding in and go live.”

Hannibal opened his eyes and wiped the tears away that had gathered along his lashes. He stood and smoothed wrinkles from his suit. He left the empty room.

That night, he lay against Will's chest. Strong arms held him close and secured. The hand stroking through his hair paused for the briefest moment before it resumed and Will spoke into the silence.

“Would you have done it? Killed Charlie for Nigel?”

They hadn't spoken of what they contemplated in Majorca. It seemed a leap in thinking but it was not. Hannibal could see why Will asked him now. He kissed the sweaty skin over Will's heart. “I don't know. I would have met Gabriela by then. If she truly no longer felt any love for Nigel, I might have tried to convince Nigel to let her go with Charlie instead. They both would keep their lives on the condition they leave Katinka while they made sense of their relationship. That might have pushed Nigel to do something rash, but it would have been for the best.”

Will considered his words, flawlessly picking up on his reasoning. “Charlie being gone might not save their marriage. Nigel and Gabi deserved to not be trapped in a loveless marriage. However, you would have found it equally satisfying if Nigel killed Charlie himself.” He scratched gentle nails along Hannibal's scalp and down his back as he imagined the different scenarios.

“The thought has its merits.” Hannibal rose up to cage Will in his arms, settling between his thighs. “I don't want to talk anymore, Will.”

Will laughed between kisses, easily surrendering to Hannibal's explorations. “Sex drives are always heightened around funerals.”

“I know, and I am terribly vexed that you have turned me into such a predictable statistic.”

And with everyone asleep, their guests tucked away in rooms scattered about the house and his brother finally home in a fresh grave, Hannibal lost himself in Will. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to feel. Will provided everything he needed. Selfish demands. Tear-choke pleas. His beauty surpassed every impossible standard when he suffered. Rose-flushed skin marred by bruises. Teeth marks smeared with blood.

Will was Hannibal's golden ratio.

Still he begged. He clung to Hannibal and whispered his love and devotion. Praise written in the bloody lines he scraped across Hannibal's body. This was their love. Painful and agonizing but theirs all the same. Just as meaningful as the times they were gentle. Just as true. Just as pure. His prize. His treasure. A relief when he was in agony. Torture when he craved mistreatment. Hannibal could not have survived this Hell without Will and the comfort he gave him just by existing.

Hannibal woke the next day with the afternoon sun falling across his worn body, his mind blissfully quiet.

Chapter End Notes

A few things:

I have been waiting for this dinner scene for a long time. The first, official, look into the lives of the Murder Family. I am so intrigued by the idea of Hannibal having his taboo nature accepted and embraced by his family. I think there are endless possibilities and I had a lot of writing this version.

The scene between Hannibal and Nigel was the first one I thought of before I started this series. I just really loved the idea of Hannibal using his memory palace and version of Nigel to cope with his grief. This scene was supposed to convey the idea of Hannibal coming full circle with his emotions and finally accepting that Nigel is gone. I hope you all enjoyed it.

The next chapter will be the final chapter. I don't know if this concludes the series. Some people showed interest in another AU where Nigel and Gabi survived. Others mentioned exploring more of Hannibal and Will being parents. If you have an opinion either way or different, I wouldn't mind hearing it.

Thanks so much to all those who have stopped by. See you Thursday! Please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! This is it. The final chapter for this story. I'm not really sure what to call it. It's not an epilogue, per se. It's shorter than most chapters. Perhaps, think of it as a bonus chapter. Just a little something more that Hannibal deemed Super Important before we ended things. :) Sorry for the delay. I have been really sick since last week. I didn't want to ruin the chapter because my writing and editing skills were simply non-existent last week. I'm a little better now and was able to look this over. I hope everyone enjoys this last little peek into Hannibal's story. I want to thank Stralovat, Ruthless330, Imanerdandliketoread, Welcome2the_Goondocks, Fanfictionismyaddiction and Kai_99 for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments last chapter. I really appreciate it and hope you like the last installment.

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-One

Before a wedding or engagement party—anything that focused on Will and Hannibal—Will insisted on throwing a birthday party for Katinka. As if Hannibal would have any objections. On a beautiful day not long after they returned to Lithuania. By chance falling just a week after Nigel and Gabriela's funerals. Katinka turned, officially, a year old.

It was something to celebrate with abandon. Hannibal and Mischa took care of everything, saving Will from giving himself an anxiety attack. He wanted everything to be perfect. The first birthday without Nigel and Gabriela had the chance of shrouding the day in melancholy. Will wanted this day to be something unspoiled.

They all agreed a small, intimate affair with just their family was for the best.

Will had extracted a promise from Hannibal, through underhanded means, that he would not hold an elaborate dinner party for the occasion. For accepting such a lost opportunity, Hannibal was able to easily gain complete control of their engagement party—that Will promised he would attend the entirety of.

Hannibal had always heard the most successful relationships were built on compromises.

The birthday dinner would be simple, by his standards, full of comforting dishes. It was the dessert he chose to focus on. Katinka still had a mostly liquid diet due to her sensitive stomach. Though, she was showing wonderful progress with solids. She loved avocado but hated spinach. She despised bananas but adored blueberries. Her favorite thus far were mangos.

Hannibal checked on the main course: lasagna with a sauce made from mushrooms and short ribs. The cheese was just bubbling, barely browned. Not quite ready but the scent filling the kitchen was mouthwatering. He left the kitchen while the lasagna finished cooking to join his family in the main sitting room.

He had allowed Katinka, and the rest of them, to have dessert after she opened her presents. A break in old patterns, but worth it.

As he researched recipes, he came to realize he didn't want to make a cake. Something cool and tart. Something to actually enjoy and not so decadently wasteful as a whole cake to herself, to pulverize and gnash with Dionysian glee. Such celebrations did have their place, he would never deny. However, Hannibal decided on individual trifles. Layers of creamy custard, mango purée and throughout each—bite-size chunks of fluffy sponge cake. A popular experiment with his family, who kept returning to the kitchen for the extra servings.

He found Will sitting in a chair feeding small bites to Katinka as she babbled on his lap, stealing every other spoonful. Hannibal came to kneel by their chair and kissed the sweet stickiness off Katinka's cheek.

“Is she enjoying her birthday?”

“As much as a one year-old can enjoy a day dedicated to them. She likes the paper everything was wrapped in and she is now addicted to mango, thanks to you.” Will stole another bite of cake and crème, smiling down at Katinka as she attempted to wrestle the glass from his hand.

Hannibal only smiled at the accusation. It was entirely bizarre, feeling amusement and joy at the sight of her covered in sticky orange mush instead of disgust—as he usually did when he interacted with messy children. Will finished off the dessert when Hannibal attacked Katinka's cheeks and hands with a lavender-scented wipe. Once she was cleaned, he took the glass from Will and exchanged it for a small wrapped package.

“One more gift,” Hannibal said.

Will balanced Katinka on his lap as he slipped the ribbons off and pulled the paper away to reveal a small rounded box. Silver. Intricate designs along the edges with an empty center where a cameo once was set. Will carefully opened it, took no more than a few seconds of looking at the contents before shutting the lid to try to hand it as carefully as he could back to Hannibal. A strange sort of laugh escaped him and Hannibal couldn't help smiling, it was a sound he had never heard before from Will.

“No.” Another delightful laugh and a look of fond disbelief. “No, you didn't. You didn't just gift our one year-old with diamond hair clips. Really old diamond hair clips.”

“I did.”

“*Why?*”

“Because they have been in my possession long enough, waiting for their rightful owner.” When Will only frowned at him, he shrugged and combed his fingers through Katinka's hair.

“It's not her fault the diamond is her birthstone. You'll have to get used to such gifts. And I know just the occasion she can wear them to.”

That calmed Will, if only a little. He looked at the clips and then the box again. A quiet study of the antiques. “These are family heirlooms, aren't they.”

“Yes. I, along with my siblings, were able to take a few small trinkets from our home, before Robertus took us away. I couldn't say what Nigel and Mischa deemed important to save.” Hannibal traced one of the swirling designs on the lid with a careful fingertip. “These weren't even my mother's favorite, but I have memories of her placing them so delicately in her curls. I don't really know why I took these. It's not as if I planned to pass them on. Now, I am glad I made such random choices when I was thirteen.”

Will kissed him, the small, shy smile teasing at his mouth whenever Hannibal shared such insignificant things with him. He pushed the box into his hands. “Fine. But I get to squirrel these away out of her reach, whenever you're not wanting to doll her up.”

“Of course,” Hannibal mollified Will, already planning the upcoming events Katinka would wear them at, or something similar.

They did, after all, have a very busy social calendar ahead of them.

* * * * *

His lover was annoyed. Teetering on the precarious borderline of rudeness and disinterest as staff continuously came to him for last-minute advice, updates and any and all small crises that most would be beside themselves with at such a time. Not Will. He was anxious, to be sure. Nervous.

Someone who didn't know Will might think he had a change of heart.

Hannibal's healed little wolf prowled about so at the thought of this all leading toward a cage, gilded or otherwise. Not for himself, but for Hannibal. For Katinka. For the family whom had come to cherish Will. Will always fell back on his choking self-doubt and loathing. So sure there would come a day when they all would see him and not find the wondrous creature who stumbled his way into their den, but a monster. Will feared more than anything they would realize too late they were stuck with him, a freakish burden.

As if Hannibal's devotion could ever fade from anything but fanatical worship.

It was a heady, addictive thing to be completely seen and understood. To be accepted, poisonous spurs and all, was a bliss Hannibal had never experienced before Will and refused to live without it. He refused to live without Will. Hannibal would do many things, terrible things, to keep Will.

He smiled, watching from his window at the Lecter estate as Will hid for a few moments in the part of their largest garden that was closed off to guests and staff. From where he stood, the details of Will's attire were too far away to discern. Will looked beautiful, all the same. Katinka babbled softly against his shoulder, small hand clutching and petting the material

beneath sensitive fingertips. She was fond of velvet and Hannibal watched, delighted, as she seemed transfixed by the soft white material of his jacket.

Hannibal rested his cheek against her silky curls, gathered up for the occasion with her diamond clips, and turned her toward the window. “Do you see your Papa?”

She smiled, knowing that word for the meaning of Will being somewhere nearby, and lay against Hannibal to stare at all the distracting things above and below. He turned them as he heard the door open. Katinka wriggled in his hold, giggling at the sight of Mischa. Mischa came to them, arms already out to receive her niece.

“You are devastating,” he said as he twirled her about to get a better look at her. A light and frilly cocktail dress a few shades darker than his pale pink tie and brocade vest. Silver lace and brocade covering her bodice and trailing down along her skirt.

“So is Will,” Mischa teased. “A perfect match to my handsome brother.” She trailed delicate fingers along his smooth jaw.

For one surreal moment, Hannibal had a peculiar feeling that he was looking into a window at another time. A time where there was no warm castle, no family to be found wandering these halls who loved and accepted him unconditionally. There was no Mischa, standing before him as a beautiful woman, about to accompany him downstairs and outside to his wedding. Nigel, a gaping absence as if never there to begin with.

With a blink of his eyes, the vision vanished. Mischa laughed as he pulled her into his arms, kissing her again and again on the crown of her head. The scent of her, warm and sweet, filled his senses and Hannibal exhaled a shaky breath as his grip tightened around her and Katinka.

“So sentimental all of a sudden! I never would have guessed you would be the type to cry at your wedding.”

“I'm not crying.” His voice was muffled against her shining ringlets but she heard him all the same. He would never be able to explain the gut-wrenching sense of loss that came over him, the panic that rushed through him at the idea of his family missing from his life. Instead of attempting to put to words what he just felt, he only held her a little longer.

Teasing set aside for the moment, Mischa returned the hug and kissed his cheek before pulling back to look him over. “I love seeing you so happy, Hannibal. You are perfect as you are, of course, but I can't wait to see what all you'll accomplish with Will at your side.”

Before he could reply, make a fool of himself with the lovesick sentiment demanding to be unleashed, they were interrupted by a member of the staff. It was time. Hannibal followed Mischa downstairs to one of the back entrances of Castle Lecter. The sound of violins and cellos softly plucked could be heard from beyond a small grove of trees and flowering lilac bushes. Mischa led him through the thick, perfumed haze and down the path to the gathering. A low murmur of pleasant chatter grew louder with each step they took.

They past through a cluster of birch trees and Hannibal smiled at the group awaiting them. The event his family insisted upon. The show he warned Will about and prepared him for. It wasn't all acquaintances and powerful friends of Robertus and Murasaki. Hannibal's friends he kept closer than others. Family he hadn't seen nor thought of in years. Sitting with his family were the Vergers. Margot and Alana arrived a few days earlier. Caleb asleep in Margot's arms. Soft and small and already so much bigger than when Will and Hannibal left him.

A mix of family, friends and acquaintances who littered his ancestral home by several hundred. Out of propriety. Hardly any of these people mattered. Though, Hannibal did love putting on a grand show.

Katinka squealed in rapturous joy, senses overcome by the sights and sounds. Will turned when he heard her, from the quiet conversation he had been engaged in with the officiant. As their eyes met across the sea of people, the dectet ensemble took that as their signal to begin the ceremony. Their guests rose and Hannibal lost sight of Will. Mischa took one step from him to find her seat but stopped her retreat when his fingers curled gently around her wrist.

“Will you stay with me?”

Mischa smiled and turned her smaller hand into his. “Until the end.”

The three of them came up the path made for him. A plush carpet of dark grass covered in petals that fell from the orchards nearby. Will stepped toward them, eager and ready to receive them. Before she left him, Hannibal lifted Mischa's hand to kiss. He took up Katinka and whispered words only for her against her silken cheek. The smile Mischa gave him was a trembling little thing.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one who cried at weddings.

Will took Mischa's place, but not before sending her and Katinka off with a kiss. Finally, he held out his hand and Hannibal immediately took it. Will did not dress in white, nor did he choose black. So different from his play at being a pretty adornment for Hannibal to show off. Unlike anything Hannibal had yet to see. Will's face was shaved smooth, unblemished by even his most stubborn cuts that took the longest to heal. He trimmed his hair just enough for the occasion, but purposely kept enough length to disguise his scar. Will's suit jacket was a cobalt velvet with a silk shirt several shades lighter beneath. No vest, no tie. The silk scarf around his neck and tucked into the jack was a woven blend of blues and greens that turned his eyes into a sky of winter storms.

The exposed skin at the base of Will's throat gave Hannibal the oddest urge to bite his collarbone. Their officiant was halfway through her speech before Hannibal supposed he should pay attention to the momentous proceedings going on around him. The smirk on Will's lips told him he knew where his mind wandered off to.

When Hannibal was given Will's ring, he held it up to study in the afternoon sun. A dark, gleaming gold that looked splendid against Will's skin. An inscription within only for Will. Hannibal turned the band to inspect the etching along the surface. A continuous interlocking

of antlers. The imagery and symbolism meant many things to Hannibal, and only once before had he gifted another with a similar trinket.

Hannibal kissed Will's knuckles before sliding the ring into place, however, he found himself pausing and looking into Will's curious eyes. They had already made their vows to one another, in an exchange just between them. And yet, Hannibal couldn't help speaking into the silence.

“There is something I would like to say. I never wanted to get married. I never wanted to share my life with anyone. Honestly, I never thought about it.” Confused yet still jovial murmuring rose up from the crowd around them. Will only watched him, never looked away from him. “Knowing myself the way I do, I thought that there couldn't possibly exist someone who is anything like me. No one would ever understand, could accept me, if I let them close. I made peace with the knowledge that I would only experience love and connection with my family and nothing more. And I was happy. I was truly happy, Will. I never knew anything else. I didn't know you were out there, waiting. If I ever dwelt on who I would choose for a spouse, I would have immediately considered such pondering a game and nothing more. For they would have to be perfect. Nothing less than perfection to survive at my side. An ideal that couldn't possibly exist. But you do. You are my ideal, Will.” Hannibal slid the ring into place. “Everything about you is identical to the ideal that I have carried with me my entire life. I've looked for you so long.”

Will waited patiently for the officiant to say what needed to be said, calmly took the ring and placed it back on Hannibal's finger where it belonged. Hannibal would never be certain if the expected formalities had been uttered because Will waited for no one after he fulfilled his end of the performance. Will pulled him close, their foreheads pressed together as he smiled.

“You found me,” he whispered before kissing Hannibal while the ceremony continued to drone on.

* * * * *

In the months leading up to their wedding, Will watched, morbidly transfixed, as Hannibal had experimented endlessly with food and drinks. Hannibal cooked dish after dish, throwing out anything that didn't please him or Will. Finally, he managed to narrow down a menu of twelve courses with alternatives to each, and another menu dedicated entirely to hors d'oeuvres and drinks. And that didn't cover the desserts, the wines and spirits to pair them with, and the wedding cakes.

It was the first time in their relationship that Will attempted to kill him and Hannibal often revisited the memory with an enamored fondness.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, the celebration never lost momentum. Now, with twilight settling over the estate, Hannibal admired the sunset as he looked for Will. His guests continued to eat and drink. The ensemble had packed up hours before and now they all made merry to music that played outdoors as well as inside. A few drunken well-wishers stumbled into his path, but they did not sidetrack him for long.

Hannibal came inside to the main sitting room and found no trace of Will. However, Robertus spotted him as he talked with a cousin and broke from their small group to pull Hannibal into a one-armed hug, without spilling his champagne. Robertus kissed his cheek before patting it, pride and love in his gaze.

“I know you were happy, Hannibal. Even when you were a boy, you were alone but never lonely.”

“Yes. Solitude has never been a thing to dread for me.”

“There are shades of happiness and fulfillment. I was happy before I met Murasaki. Every day of my life was tinged with the glow of pure joy before I went to collect my brother's children. I would have been happy and complete if I had remained alone, but that happiness is of a different color, a different scale, than what it was the moment I stole a few precious seconds of Murasaki's time. I don't remember quite so vividly my days before I met you and your siblings. Not everyone meets the people who complete them. I was lucky enough to witness such beauty so many times, as you are lucky.”

Hannibal swallowed the sudden thickness in his throat and had to look away from his uncle's knowing eyes. “I remind myself of my good fortune every day, Robertus.”

Robertus chuckled and leaned against the bar. “And now you'll experience just how vicious love can make the Lecters. You, out of all of us, have more to lose. Protect Will and Katinka from the shadows you constantly play with.”

It was as close to a chastisement as he would ever get from Robertus. “As fiercely as Will will protect me,” Hannibal promised with the raise of his coupe.

Robertus smiled and tapped their glasses together. “Have you told Will yet? Your surprise?”

“I wanted to this evening, however, I seem to have lost my husband.”

“I believe I last saw him inside, dancing with his daughter.”

Of course. The last place Hannibal would think to look. Hannibal wished Robertus a good evening and set out once more on his quest. Down a scarcely used hall, music echoed along the walls. The doors to the ballroom had been left opened, welcoming any and all who wished to venture inside. Hannibal had always loved this room. Original stone and wooden accents. Gleaming floors. An ornate grand piano tucked safe in the corner.

Hannibal looked through the turning crowd of dancers and his breath caught. Will looked as if he had always belonged to this place. A lovely phantom in clothes that clung to every curve and plane of his pleasing form. Against his chest, safe in his arms, was their daughter. Katinka was almost asleep as her father slowly turned her around and again on the dance floor. Hannibal laughed when he came closer and saw that not only were her shoes missing, but also her pearlescent stockings and hair clips. At the sound of his mirth, Will looked up and smiled, knowing exactly what amused him.

“She had enough of your baby haute couture. I liberated her from some of the frills and ruffles and bows and *diamonds*.”

“That's all right, I'll find something else. I'm thinking next time, it'll be taffeta and French lace. ”

Will snickered but otherwise chose to ignore the threat and eased Katinka from one shoulder to the other. “Shall we take her upstairs to bed?”

“Not just yet.” Hannibal wrapped his arm around Will's waist and held onto Katinka with his free hand. They fell into step and Hannibal leaned in to kiss along Will's jaw to his temple. “I only got to dance with you once this evening. Allow me a moment more of this.”

Will turned to kiss him, sliding his hand into the hair at his nape. “I'll give you until midnight, when she starts screaming for her bottle and lamb.”

“Deal. I'll make the seconds count.”

“You always do.”

“Will, there is something I've wanted to ask you.” Hannibal swept his hand along Will's back, pulling him ever closer. “We never decided on what to do for a honeymoon.”

“You have somewhere in mind.”

“I do.” Hannibal pulled away and cupped Will's cheek. “Let me show you Italy, Will. We can leave any time you wish. Tonight, even.”

Will laughed and kissed his palm before holding on to him. “I have this feeling you've been planning this a while.”

“Several months, yes.”

“I have no objections to Italy. Show me everything you want, Hannibal.”

“There is one stipulation, if we go.” Hannibal ran careful fingers through Katinka's hair. “We must leave Katinka behind. It wouldn't be safe to bring her, for what's on our itinerary.”

“And what it is that you've planned?”

“I have it on good authority that it will be a very fruitful hunting season when we arrive.” Hannibal smiled as Will's pupil's dilated and a shaky breath escaped him. He was so lovely. Hannibal didn't resist the urge to kiss him.

“Okay.” Will took a breath to calm down. “But we don't do this until we've made all the arrangements we can for Katinka.”

Joy rushed through Hannibal's veins and he stifled Will's worries with more kisses. “It's done, darling. Robertus and Murasaki volunteered to keep Katinka until we return. Mischa also wants to spend more time with her niece.”

“Mira, too?”

“Mira, too.”

“How long are you planning for us to be away?”

“When we're finished hunting. Until you grow bored. Katinka need not be away from us the entire time we're abroad. I'd love to have you both with me in France.”

Will laughed and shook his head. “One country at a time.” He kissed the pout from Hannibal's lips. “Very well. Tonight.”

They parted for the time being. Hannibal searched out his family to tell them the news. Will sneaked upstairs to steal a few more minutes with Katinka. He knew it was hard for Will to let her go. Even if only for a short time. Will was possessive and protective of the things he loved. Hannibal was the same. However, their pretty little pup was nowhere near ready for the darker sides of her fathers. She might not ever be ready for that part of Hannibal and Will's world. He could only hope Katinka held the same darkness inside her, the same as Nigel's.

In the meantime, he had travel plans to finalize and bags to pack. Anticipation roiled raw and electric beneath his skin as he thought of the days to come. Hannibal had such wondrous things to show Will.

Chapter End Notes

A few things:

First, I want to thank everyone who stopped by to leave comments. There's nothing more wonderful, more encouraging, than seeing someone enjoyed the story you wrote. :) You all have been so thoughtful and kind. I really appreciate it.

Second, I apologize if this last chapter was lackluster or terrible. I didn't have the heart to make you all wait any longer. I still feel awful, I'm not sure what I've come down with, but my editing and writing skills are much improved since last week.

Third, I hope this last little bit was at least somewhat fulfilling. I wanted to go a little further into their wedding day, but not dedicate an entire 6k-word chapter to it. Just a little something. Hannibal couldn't end things without at least some mention, since Will skipped over it entirely. :D

Fourth, yes. The last bit at the end is a hint that Hannibal and Will are going to go after the people Mason hired who are directly responsible for Nigel and Gabi's deaths, orphaning Katinka and almost killing Will. A Murder Honeymoon. :P Because it's just not Hannibal and Will if there's no promise of murder and mayhem.

Once again, thank you for sticking with me. This story was a trip but I really enjoyed writing it. Hopefully, I'll see you around.

Come visit me on my tumblr!

Stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

~CReed

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!